

It's the Great Spirit Sleigh, Hiccup Haddock

by guardianofscrewingup

Category: How to Train Your Dragon, Rise of the Guardians

Genre: Drama, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Hiccup, Jack Frost

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-12-24 09:32:16

Updated: 2013-02-04 01:17:49

Packaged: 2016-04-26 13:14:15

Rating: T

Chapters: 4

Words: 42,218

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: After accidentally ruining Snoggletog, Hiccup entreats Odin to give him a sign that Snoggletog can be fixed and that he can someday be accepted by the village. His prayers are answered in the form of a sleigh crashing to Earth, carrying five very strange spirits that promise to help him make this Snoggletog one to remember.

1. Chapter 1

A/N: This has been eating at my head and I wanted to at least get the first chapter up before Christmas and use it as a way of working through my HTTYD writer's block so that I can crank out the next chapter of How to Foil an Outcast's Plan.

This takes place in a separate continuity than HTFAOP and the Guardian of Screwing Up series and if you look very carefully, you might find little jokes about various holiday movies and specials threaded in. Enjoy and Happy Snoggletog to all!

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<p>It's the Great Spirit Sleigh, Hiccup Haddock

by Saphie

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<p>Chapter One: The Village Without a Snoggletog Tree

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<p>It was official: Snoggletog was ruined. Hiccup had ruined it just like he ruined just about everything.<p>

"_Hiccup_." The disappointment in his father's voice was overwhelming this time, somehow worse than the countless times he'd heard disappointment in his voice before.

"I was just trying to make it better. Only, uh, that resulted in setting it on fire. Not _exactly_how I was envisioning it going, but you know, combining the Snoggletog tree with a weapon to take down a dragon wasn't a bad idea in principle, given that they burn it down just about every yea -"

"Hiccup," his father interrupted, sighing and pinching the bridge of his nose, "go back to the house."

Hiccup looked up at the annoyed and disappointed faces of the villagers standing around in the snow. There was another mild explosion behind them that made them all pause their glaring enough to wince, but they quickly went back to glaring again. Even Gobber was shaking his head at him. Turning away, shoulders drooping, head hanging, Hiccup started stomping back to the house, leaving his father behind to clean up his mess.

As usual.

He heard the disappointed mutterings of the other villagers behind him as he left.

"That boy is _always_making a mess of things - "

"- Can't walk two steps without ruining _something_-"

"Mommy, what if Odin isn't happy about not having an offering and a tree? What if he doesn't bring presents this year?"

"Don't get your hopes up, dear. Hopefully, he'll come next year. That boy, I swear he's just about _useless_..."

Hiccup sighed, briefly closing his eyes. Because of it, he didn't notice the shoulder that was shoved towards him, causing him to fall over and barrel face first into the snow. Wiping snow off his face, he looked up to see an angry Snotlout standing there, with Fishlegs, the twins, and Astrid standing right behind him. For once, he didn't really try to protest the usual epithets and insults, because he pretty much 100% deserved them.

"I know you're used to messing things up, like, every day, but you couldn't let it rest for _one_Snoggletog?" shouted Snotlout, waving his arms.

"I -"

"Without a tree and the Snoggletog offering, Odin's going to skip us this year and it's all your fault," said Ruffnut scathingly.

"Way to go at messing stuff up for everybody instead of just _you_this time," said Tuffnut.

Fishlegs didn't have any insults to offer, but he did give Hiccup an upset look, making it clear how angry and disappointed he was.

Snotlout moved to possibly kick Hiccup or punch him, but Astrid grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Snotlout," was all she said in a warning tone of voice. Generally speaking, she didn't interfere in how the others treated Hiccup but she wouldn't tolerate it if it went too far, especially when he was so much weaker than the rest of them.

The teens turned to walk away, leaving Astrid to face Hiccup, sitting in the snow.

Even though she'd stopped the others, she wasn't letting him off the hook without saying something herself.

"Astrid, I just -"

"You could have just sat back and let us all have a good holiday, but no, as usual, you had to mess it up for everyone because you never think things through. Thanks a lot," she said, crossing her arms. "You're selfish, Hiccup. You're always selfish and it's all the more disappointing because this time of the year is when people aren't supposed to be."

The disappointment in her voice hurt more than anything else. It was almost like she thought he was capable of better. Almost.

With that, she turned and stomped away to help clean up the wreckage from the fire caused by Hiccup's latest attempt to "improve" things in the village and take down a dragon.

Lifting himself out of the snow, Hiccup headed back to his house just long enough to duck in and get his wooly hat, then started walking out in the snow. He knew it was dangerous, he knew he shouldn't be heading out this late at night, especially when it was this cold, but he was dressed warmly and he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep for a good while.

Besides, the moon was full and bright tonight, reflecting off the ice and snow. It was peaceful, at least, which made it a relief to walk out into its light away from the chaos he'd caused in the village. As he walked out into the forest and up the trail into the mountains, wiggling his toes in both boots to keep them warm as he walked, Hiccup couldn't stop himself from stewing in his thoughts.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, rigging up the Snoggletog tree with a mini-catapult. Dragons came around this time of the year to attack Berk as reliably as the sun rose in the morning. He thought it might help to have the tree itself thoroughly defended. If there was the added bonus of downing a dragon and changing his reputation in the village, all the better. He just hadn't banked on the demonstration leading to a fire that destroyed the tree, the altar that had the winter offering to Odin, and the cart with most of the food for the winter Snoggletog feast all in one go.

It took him awhile before he reached the high point on the cliffs that he was aiming for, the highest point he could reach safely tonight without getting too exhausted. Looking out on Berk, on the snow-dusted forests below, on the cold ocean reflecting the moonlight on the water, he spoke to the air, looking up at the moon and stars.

"Odin, I know I'm not really the type to pray. Sorry about that, I - I usually assume I'm the last person you want to hear from. But if you're up there and you can hear me...I'm kind of at the end of my rope here. If there's anything I can do to fix Snoggletog, could you just show me somehow? Show me how?"

He shook his head.

"I'd even appreciate just a sign that it can even be done. Because, I - " his voice cracked, "- I just don't know if I can do another Snoggletog where everyone hates me and I don't know if I can go another year with my dad being disappointed in just about everything I do. I'm so close to just...giving up. Because if it's never going to work, if I'm never going to prove myself to them, I might as well stop digging the hole deeper. I might as well just keep apprenticing under Gobber and, I dunno, fix pots for the rest of my life, living up alone in a cabin somewhere with only sheep for friends."

Wiping at his eyes, which had started watering a bit - surely just from the cold - Hiccup said, "I need to know now if I should keep trying to make something of myself or accept that I'm going to take over being the village hermit from Mildew someday. So, if you are listening, if there's any chance at all I can fix things, I need to know now. I just need some kind of sign."
>He kept looking out over the sky.<p>

"Anything at all."

The night sky and landscape stayed pristine, with no change. There was no storm, there was no crack of thunder, no lightning bolt out of the blue. There was only the pale light of the moon, the sparkling stars, and the faint light coming up from the village as they cleaned up his mess.

"I guess it's time to face the facts," Hiccup said to himself, his voice dry and toneless. "I should probably start coming up with good sheep names."

It was right then that there was a clap of thunder and a bright light appeared in the sky. Something bright went streaking down from it, crashing into the forest. There wasn't an explosion, so the background noise from the village probably blocked out the sound to everyone in Berk, but from Hiccup's vantage point he could tell this was something big.

Hiccup raised both eyebrows and nodded his head to the side.

"Okay, as far as signs go, not bad," he said to the sky. "I'll take it."

With that, he went running down the trail in the direction of the fallen...whatever it was. Naturally. Running right into trouble was just what he did.

* * *

><p>It had not been a good day for the Guardians. The fairies had started stealing children again, leaving fetches in their place, the Guardians had gotten a tip-off from the Leprechaun and well, the rest

was history - provided, at of course, that your definition of history involved ferocious battles and lots of people shouting at each other about their respective ideologies. (Most*would* consider that part of history).

The fairies wanted to preserve childhood by keeping children the same age forever. The Guardians understood that childhood had to come to its end. What they tried to affect was how it did, whether or not that hope and fun and wonder could be preserved, carried on into adulthood.

The fight had actually been turning in their favor until Maeve herself had jumped in. North had tossed one of his snow globes at the worst possible time, it had combined with whatever banishing spell she'd been working on and then there'd been a clap of thunder, a bright light, and they'd found themselves careening out of control into a forest. The crash into a clearing hadn't been devastating, but it certainly hadn't been pleasant.

"I haven't eaten anything in about a year and I still feel like I'm going to throw it up," Jack groaned from where he was collapsed in the bottom of the sleigh. "Everyone okay?"

There was more groaning as the other Guardians untangled themselves from the heap they'd found themselves in and checked themselves to figure out the answer to Jack's question. None of them had been thrown from the sleigh at the very least.

"I'm fine, just a few feathers out of place," said Tooth, trying to fix the ones on her head.

Sandy gave an okay sign with his hand, even though he was rubbing his rear with the other.

"I'll let you know when the world stops spinning," groaned Bunny, who still hadn't moved from where he was sprawled across the seats. He was still apparently trying to keep his lunch down.

"I am right as rain," said North, leaning over the side of the sleigh, "but the sleigh, she is not looking so good."

He hopped out to get a better look, and Jack took to the air to make sure there weren't any fairies nearby, ready to attack. There weren't, but what he found instead astounded him. The air had felt wonderfully cool but he sure hadn't been expecting_ snow._

"It was _summer _where we just were," he pointed out. "Did we get tossed to the southern hemisphere somehow?"

"Is possible," said North, eying the wings of the sleigh with concern. That was going to be difficult to fix. "Snow globe hit fairy spell. Who knows where magic took us."

"Wherever it is, it's ruddy _freezing_," said Bunny, finally sitting up, rubbing his arms.

Sandy waved to get the attention of the others and pointed up.

"Good idea, Sandy!" said North. "We can ask Man in Moon to tell us where we are."

North looked up at the moon. "Man in Moon!" He waved.
"Hallooo!"

Moonlight was suddenly focused on them like a spotlight.

"Man in Moon, we are needing your help. Sleigh is broken and we don't know where we are -"

North broke off, looking alarmed. "What do you mean, you don't know who I am? I am Nicholas St. North."

North listened. "You only know Sandy and Tooth? How is this?"

He listened some more then turned to the others in alarm. "He says he does not know Jack, Bunny, and I. How can this be?"

"Don't you remember choosing them?" Tooth asked the Man in the Moon, concerned. When she got her answer, her eyes went wide. Then something occurred to her and she asked slowly, "What year is it to you?"

Tooth looked around at the others, darting around in place in the air. "Uh, guys, it looks like that magical explosion didn't just send us to a different place. We maybe got sent to a _slightly_different time, too."

"How different?" asked Bunny.

"About a thousand years different." Tooth winced. "Apparently, It's 1012."

"What?!" Bunny practically exploded. "Crikey, are you serious?"

"Modest Mussorgsky!"

"Which makes sense, if Sandy and I are the only ones Manny recognizes."

"Manny, what should we do?" asked North.

A globe of light shot down from the moon like a shooting star, slowing down as it approached them. Filling the entire clearing with hauntingly pale light, it alighted gently in North's outstretched hands. It was bright and beautiful, like a little mini-moon.

"Manny says we should bury this for seven days and then it will be ready to use. He says to combine with one of my snowglobes and we will be taken home to right time."

"What is it?" Jacked asked, craning his neck to peer at it.

"That's a piece of the moon itself!" explained Tooth.

"Possesses very old, very powerful magic," said North. "Not ripe yet, though."

"It has to be ripe?" asked Jack. "It's a rock. This isn't a banana we're talking about here."

"This is old magic, Jack. It must be in touch with the Earth for a time to become even more powerful. Strong enough to take us home," explained North. He looked up. "Thank you, Manny. But what of our powers? Tooth and Sandy have believers in this time but the rest of us do not."

North clucked in concern at the answer.

"Manny says we have some time, but not a week, before our powers fade."

"So what are we supposed to do?" asked Bunny.

"Manny says we must find a child who believes in us," answered North. "At least if we don't want to be very weak before the end."

Jack rolled his eyes. "_Again_?" He threw up his arms. "Okay, sure, it only took me three hundred years the last time."

North looked back up the moon, listening. "Manny is wondering why future him chose Guardian with attitude," he relayed, amused.

Jack shook his finger up at the moon, his expression one that screamed 'oh no you didn't.' "Oh no no no no no, don't you even start. I know you're a giant celestial orb, but if you_ did_ have legs, you wouldn't have any to stand on there. You'll eventually pick me for a host of reasons, not the least of which is my _infinite_patience with you."

North smiled. "Now he is laughing."

Jack waved his hand airily. "Glad to know my sass is appreciated."

North looked up. "We will let you know if we have any more questions. Thank you, Manny. I know this situation is strange, especially since three of us are strangers to you."

"Hand over that orb and I'll get that little beauty underground," said Bunny and North tossed him it. He immediately started digging.

"We need to figure out where we are and if there are any people nearby," said Tooth.

"And find some shelter," said Bunny as snow and then dirt started to fly. After burying the orb, he stamped his foot over the dirt. "I know some of you are comfortable in the cold, but I can't stand it. Jack, mark this with a little ice statue, would you? We need to remember where it was."

Jack pointed his staff over the mound of dirt and created a little pedestal out of ice, with a little crescent moon at the top.

Right then, something snapped in the underbrush nearby. Jack turned towards the edge of the clearing, staff pointed ahead.

"Guys, we were just in a fight with some fairies. We might not have been the only ones thrown back," he pointed out.

Those that had weapons got them out and advanced towards the woods. There was another crack of a twig, then the rustling of leaves, and then noise that made it abundantly clear that someone was running away. Thudding footsteps crunched through the snow. The group surged forward through the trees, Jack, Sandy, and Tooth taking to the air.

Jack saw a shape flit between two trees and zipped down towards it.

"Over here!"

The shape was small, and Jack only got a brief flash of a weird green hat and fur, before he snagged at the figure with his staff. He caught an ankle and the person tumbled into the snow.

"Pleasedon'teatme."

The voice was young, male, and scared. Jack got a closer look now and saw that it was just a boy, maybe in his teens. The voice put him at thirteen or fourteen but he was either very small for his age or younger than he sounded. His auburn hair had fallen over his face as he lay there on the ground.

What was strange to see were his clothes, but then they were in the year 1012. Jack supposed fur vests, tunics, leggings were all the rage back then - and the Ugg boots were still a thing during their time in the future. (Unfortunately.)

"It's just a kid," he said to the others as they caught up, and he lowered his staff, then leaned on it so it would be clear he was harmless.

"Pleasepleasedon'teatme." He was saying the words so fast that the magic that allowed them to understand any language took a moment to kick in. Underneath the meaning of the words, the language sounded quite old, as if something in their heads had to shake off the dust first before it would let them understand.

"We're not going to eat you," said Jack. "What even gave you that idea?"

The boy peeked out from between his fingers.

"On account of the whole frost giant thing. I saw you make that ice statue."

Jack laughed. "Do I look like a giant to you? I barely break five-four."

"Frost giants, despite the name, aren't all giants, and even if you were the giant kind, you could just be a baby one," the boy pointed out logically.

"None of us are frost giants, I promise. We're not going to hurt you."

The boy uncurled out of his fetal position and looked at the group of

them. His fear seemed to fade and slowly transform itself into something like excitement.

"...A bird lady, a giant rabbit, and three weirdly dressed guys." He looked skywards. "Well, I can definitely tell you came from the gods, because I can't think of where else you could be from."

"We're not from the -" Jack paused. "Wait, you can see me? You can see North and Bunny, too?"

Had they found a believer that quickly?

The boy nodded. "I've been expecting you," he added, excitedly.

Jack turned to look at the others and their quizzical expressions mirrored his own. How could someone expect them if they hadn't know this would happen themselves?

"You were sent by the gods, right? I was just praying to them, for help to fix things, for - for a sign - and - and here you are. A bunch of...whatever you are's, crashing down to the earth from the sky. Spirits, I guess? I'm not really sure how you'd be classified in the whole, y'know, pantheon here, but - "

"My boy, what is needing to be fixed?" North asked, deciding that was the issue they needed to address the most.

The boy picked himself up out of the snow, dusting it off of himself.

"Snoggletog," he said earnestly, and then he looked skywards again. "Didn't Odin at least tell you guys why he was sending you down here?"

"Details were a bit fuzzy," said North. He seemed to be thinking carefully. "Snoggletog is yourâ€|your winter holiday, yes?"

The boy nodded.

"Ah, because you are...Norse?" said North, looking as if he was thinking carefully, mining his memory for winter holidays in history that crossed wires with his own.

"Viking, yep," said the boy, adjusting his hat, though it was just as crooked afterward.

"The name's Hiccup."

That name seemed to give North a bit of a pause but Jack was too occupied with the name itself to wonder why.

"Hiccup? Your parents named you after a bodily function?" Jack laughed.

"It's an old Viking tradition. Ugly names scare off gnomes and trolls." He paused. "Odin really gave you nothing to go on, didn't he. Are you spirits from other parts of the world or something?"

"You could say that," said Tooth sweetly, and she darted in and

gently adjusted his hat so that it was on straight. It was instinct. "So tell us, Hiccup, what's wrong with Snoggletog?"

"Oh, just the fact that I ruined it," he said glibly. "Which is kind of what I do. With everything. Every year, around Snoggletog, the dragons come, and some years they've wrecked the tree, so this year I tried to rig it up with a catapult, that you could fire from the ground by pulling on a rope. Only, um, there were some mild issues with calibration and accuracy, and I accidentally wrecked the tree."

A pause.

"And our offering altar to Odin."

Another pause.

"Annnnd the cart that had all the food for the winter feast."

Hiccup twiddled his hands. "Everyone knows Odin doesn't come to deliver the presents without an offering, so I prayed to the gods earlier to send help or some kind of sign it could be fixed." He held out his hands, his face bright. "And here you are. Go Odin."

"How did you wreck that much stuff in one go?" Jack asked.

"Jack," Bunny said, when he saw the rueful look on Hiccup's face. The boy's mouth was a thin, little line.

"What? Look, I have thoroughly enjoyed a destructive prank or two in the past. I'm not being critical, it's genuinely impressive."

"The village doesn't really think so," said Hiccup. He shrugged. "I'm used to it by now, but I just - I don't want their Snoggletog to be ruined. And for one year, it'd be nice if everyone wasn't mad at me, but peer approval isn't exactly the kind of Snoggletog present you can ask Odin to leave giftwrapped in your helmet."

Jack's amusement over Hiccup being a walking catastrophe faded. He saw something familiar in the look in his eyes, heard something ring with familiarity in his voice. What kind of person said they were used to being considered a failure? How could anyone be okay with making a child even feel that way?

Now that he was looking for it, even the way the boy carried himself, gangly and awkward and self-conscious made it look as if he ached with loneliness.

"Hey, uh, we need a little rest because we came from a fight with some bad, uh -" Did they have fairies in this kid's culture? "-spirits. Do you think you could help us out? Then maybe we can sit down and talk about helping you with Snoggletog."

"Actually, I know of a place, but it'll probably smell like sheep and smelly old guy, fair warning," said Hiccup, waving for them to follow. "It's not far from here."

"So...dragons?" said Jack, looking at the others. "Someone want to fill me in on that? Like the whole 'they exist' thing?"

"Dragons have been around for ages, Jack," explained Tooth. "It's just where - where we're from, they've gone underground to avoid humans."

Ah, so that's where the myth had come from. Reality. Dragons had existed, but then gone underground, and been relegated to the status of myth.

"And that means, naturally, people think they're imaginary now," said Bunny. Looking sidelong at Hiccup, he said, "At least in those places."

"I wish that'd happen here," chimed in Hiccup, looking back as he skipped along. "We're constantly fighting them because they're always stealing our food. That's part of my whole problem, everyone in the village fights them, and it's part of being a Viking here."

"Why's that a problem for you?" Jack asked.

"In case you haven't noticed, my physique doesn't exactly predispose itself towards fighting giant, fire-spewing lizards," Hiccup pointed out. "Maybe towards, I don't know, lifting very small objects, knitting, and fainting very elegantly, but not so much with the throwing axes twenty feet in the air."

"Why is this problem?" North asked. "Not everyone is cut out to be warrior. This is why it is good that there are many other professions, all just as important as being warrior."

After all, he was a fighter, but his primary trade was making toys. It was building and designing and carving and creating. As much as he enjoyed a good adventure, that was his passion.

"Not here," said Hiccup. "Everyone fights here, alongside whatever else they do, and they practically do it from birth. My dad, for instance, supposedly tore a dragon's head clean off his shoulders when he was just a baby. They say he confused it for a rattle. In the day-to-day, he's the chief. That's why it's so disappointing to everyone that I'm, well...me."

Behind him the Guardians all shared concerned glances. It was an awful thing to hear coming from the mouth of a child, that they thought they were a disappointment. Hiccup's casual delivery was even more alarming; it was as if he'd simply accepted the reality of it, and decided that dry, self-effacing sarcasm was the only appropriate response.

The woods opened up to a little wooden house. It was run-down but serviceable, the roof and walls intact, even if they were starting to rot.

"This used to be Mildew's place. He kept coming into town too often, though, so they built him one even farther away from the village."

"Mildew?" said Jack, still boggling over the names in this place.

"He's just as pleasant as he sounds," Hiccup assured him, shoved the door of the place open and peeking around. "I don't think any animals

have taken up residence. The sheep and old man smell probably kept them away."

Hiccup was right about the smell. It was pretty pungent, but opening the doors and windows let them air out the place and before long, North had gathered some wood from outside and there was a pleasant fire roaring in the fire pit. With the doors and windows closed again to keep out the cold, the heat from the crackling fire made the place fairly cozy. It made Jack a little drowsy but wasn't intolerable.

"Anyone got any chestnuts?" Jack asked.

"No. Why?" asked Bunny, holding his feet up to the fire to warm them up.

"Because between that and me being here for some nose-nipping, we'd be living in a Christmas song."

North laughed but Bunny just rolled his eyes.

"Is funny because it's true!" North insisted.

"Ignore him, North, he just can't grasp the finer points of Christmas-based humor."

Hiccup, where he was sitting on a broken-down bench next to the fire, just looked confused.

"I don't get it," he said. "What's Christmas?"

"It's a long story," said Jack, expression furtive, hoping he hadn't just accidentally introduced Christianity to a pre-Christian pagan culture.

"Christmas, Christmasâ€¦ Does it have to do with that Christ guy?" The way he pronounced it rhymed with the word 'grist.' "I read about the people that believe in him in a book. They're, uh, not so happy about that whole thing with Lindisfarne, but we're not like the Mainland Vikings here. More with the colonizing and trading, less with the raidingâ€¦and murdering."

"That's good," said Jack, looking awkwardly to the others at the mention of murdering. Their expressions were all a bit awkward. Dark things like people raiding and razing and salting the earth weren't exactly their area. "I guess. About the lack of murder."

Hiccup, sensing that he'd tripped over something awkward in the conversation, cast about for another subject, tapping his fingers against his knees.

"Soo, what exactly is it that spirits like you do? When you're not, you know, helping people like me?"

Seizing the opportunity to change the subject to something more pleasant, Tooth said, "We're always helping kids like you. That's what we do, protect the children of the world as best as we can from the things that want to hurt them. We each have our own individual duties when we're not working together to do that, though. My job is to collect the baby teeth kids lose when their adult teeth come

in."

Hiccup raised both eyebrows. "That'sâ€|slightly, uh. I mean, collecting old body parts is a littleâ€|well." He tilted his head and added generously, "Then again, Vikings sometimes have a thing for collecting the ears of enemies and all that."

"I don't do it just for the sake of it."

"Yes you do," Jack said in sing-song, and Tooth shoved him, making him nearly fall off the chair he was perched on.

"Okay, I'll admit that I think they're beautiful," she said, glaring at Jack, "but teeth hold the most important memories of childhood. When someone is sad or troubled, my fairies and I help them remember the happiest times they had growing up. I collect the teeth of everyone in the world â€" I even have yours, Hiccup."

"Why did you take mine?" Hiccup asked, looking confused.

"What do you mean?" Tooth asked, tilting her head.

"If the point is to keep everyone's happy memories of childhood safe, why do you take the teeth of the kids that don't have any?"

The shocked silence of the group made Hiccup look self-conscious again.

"It was just a question."

"Hiccup, don't you have any happy memories at all?" She asked, wondering if, in her fortress here in the past - and in the future - there was a puzzle box full of teeth that were devoid of memories of joy.

Hiccup sat there, thinking very hard. "One time, my dad _almost_smiled at me. I think. It might have just been gas, though. Come to think of it, it probably was, the salted herring had been a little off that night."

Tooth took a place in front of him, kneeling and looking up into his face. She took his hands in her own and at first he seemed shy about the physical contact, but then he relaxed, fingers curling around her hands.

"What about your friends?" she asked.

Hiccup shrugged. "Don't have any."

"No one you ever played with growing up?"

"Does being shoved in the river by Snotlout count as 'playing'? Or, you know, being locked in various places? Like woodsheds? Or outhouses? Or, you know, barrels that were used to cure fish? I guess that can kinda count as a form of hide and seek. As in, they're trying to hide you by force and you seek a way of getting out of it."

"Why do they treat you this way?" Tooth asked, upset now, and bewildered.

"Becauseâ€¦well, look at me. I'm not a proper Viking. I'm a hiccup."

"I thought that was your name," Jack asked, realizing now that it maybe had a different meaning.

"It is, but it's also what Vikings call the runt of the litter. Hiccups are bad luck; most of them don't survive to adulthood."

"Your parents actually named you 'Runt'?" Jack said, voice cracking just a bit because it couldn't contain all the outrage. He hopped down from where he'd been perched on the back of a chair to land on his feet.

"Could've been worse. I heard that on the Mainland they usually leave babies like I was out to die of exposure. So when you look at it, I'm actually pretty lucky. Dad doesn't want me hurt or dead; he just thinks I'm a crushing disappointment and wishes he had someone else as his son."

Now, all the Guardians could do was stare. Jack felt something squeezing in his chest, something that was a mix of compassion and sympathetic understanding. He knew what it was like to feel unwanted and alone, but this ran far deeper for Hiccup than it ever had for him. For him, what he was, who he was, and whether or not he was worthwhile had always been a question he never got an answer for, no matter how many times he'd asked the Moon. For Hiccup, it seemed like the answer to that question from his village and father was that he wasn't worthwhile at all. It was harsh and heart-breaking and above all else, definitive.

"I â€" I don't know why I'm even telling you all this," said Hiccup faintly, as he looked at the expressions on their faces. "I'm a Viking, we don't do â€" we don't do things like, you know, feelings, orâ€¦"

He had to take a moment to squeeze his eyes shut.

"It's justâ€¦you're here now. You're spirits. You can maybe do the impossible," Hiccup went on, his voice very, very fragile. He opened his eyes and they were the kind of glassy that usually only happened in children who didn't want to be seen sad and only did it when no one else was watching. "Can you help me change it? I really justâ€¦want it all to change."

At that, Tooth swept Hiccup into her arms and hugged him tight and the expression on his face made it abundantly clear that hugs were something of an alien thing for him. Jack certainly knew what that felt like.

"Of course we will," said Jack. "We're Guardians, that's what we're here for. First things first, we're going to do something about those memories of yours. Then we're going to take a day or two to come up with a good plan and we'll make sure your village has the best Snoggletog ever."

"What are you going to do about my memories?" asked Hiccup, looking a bit overwhelmed by the hug he'd just gotten.

Jack slung his staff over his shoulders and grinned. "We're going to have a little _fun_."

* * *

><p>"Are you sure about this?" asked Hiccup, clinging to Tooth.<p>

"People do it all the time where I'm from," said Jack.

"I promise I won't let you fall," Tooth reassured Hiccup.

Jack had transformed a clearing outside into something of an impromptu ice rink, putting down a plane of ice over the ground, flattening out the snow. Then he'd fashioned some ice skates for Hiccup's boots out of actual ice. He'd made some for North, too, who was now casually gliding around like he was born to ice skate.

Hiccup took his first few awkward shuffles onto the ice and Tooth flitted around him, making sure she was close enough to dart in if he stumbled. The Viking shuffled about a foot or two before slipping back so that Tooth had to dart in and help push him upright again.

"How exactly is this supposed to work?"

"Your movements have to be fluid," said Jack, demonstrating by taking several gliding steps on the ice.

"Says the barefoot guy using ice magic," Hiccup pointed out.

Jack laughed. "Okay, okay, point."

He fashioned ice skates for himself, pausing for a just a moment in quiet reflection as he did it, before moving on, showing Hiccup the kind of gliding movements necessary to ice skate properly.

"Like that, see?"

"I wonder how this even works," Hiccup said, looking down at the skates. "To glide that smoothly, I mean. Maybe the pressure from the blade is melting the ice underneath or something, like when you rub twigs together and it makes them warmâ€|"

"Tooth, just shove him," said an impatient Jack and smiling, she complied, pushing Hiccup gently forward so that he started gliding over the ice.

"Whoa, whoa, hey, going a little too fast -"

"There's no such thing as too fast," said Jack when Hiccup glided up to him and he turned him around slowly and shoved him towards Bunny.

"Technically speaking, there is â€" whoa."

Hiccup moved his legs, a little more smoothly now and found that he could imitate the movements that Jack and North had been doing and

finding his stride a bit, he smiled.

"There you go, mate, you're getting the hang of it," said Bunny gently and he smiled back at him and turned him around gently, giving Hiccup some momentum as he glided over towards North, who had stopped to join in the game of Viking ice catch.

By the time he reached North, the boy's smile was even broader and the great big bear of a man took Hiccup by the hand, wearing a smile that matched, leading him in a circle around him to give him even more momentum and send him sailing towards Tooth.

"Your head needs to be up, Tooth!" said North.

Hiccup finally laughed now as the speed picked up, and to Jack it sounded like the laugh of a child who wasn't used to laughing. The laughter escaped from the place it was locked in, joyously bubbling its way out to freedom.

As they shoved him back and forth, he found that he was able to get more and more used to making the right movements to skate along by himself, and before long, he didn't need much shoving â€" or as many saves by Tooth and Sandman. He wasn't exactly skating like a pro, but he was careening along, almost in control, able to catch himself whenever he stumbled, and now they started to skate and fly around with him.

"Sandy, why don't you put on a little light show?" Jack suggested. "Let's make this whole thing more of an experience, huh?"

Grinning, Sandy complied, sending out trails of sand through the little ice rink.

"Wow, that, uh," said Hiccup. "That'sâ€¦|strange."

The sand started to take shapes around Hiccup, birds flitting to and fro, frogs hopping over the ice, fish swimming through the air, and Hiccup skated after them, playing tag with them, his expression aglow with the light from the dreamsand, the light from the moon, and above all else, the light of his own visible sense of wonder.

They made a game of it, chasing after the shapes and each other and before long, the clearing was filled with the sounds of their laughter â€" Hiccup's laughter, most of all â€" until one moment of distraction caused by a dreamsand butterfly sent Hiccup head first into a snow bank alongside the rink. He was still grinning as he turned over.

"You okay?" asked Jack as he glided up.

Hiccup just lay there in the snow.

"Better than okay. I didn't even know this was possible."

"Sandy's dreams, you mean?"

"Having this much fun," said Hiccup, grinning up at Jack. "It's new. Definitely interesting. I think my face is starting to hurt from laughing. Never had that happen before."

Jack smiled back but it was covering up the fact that his heart was breaking all over again.

"I have to get home soon, though," said Hiccup ruefully. "It's getting late. My dad probably figured I was just out walking, but if I take much longer, he'll start to worry. The last thing I need is him gathering a search party and me walking back perfectly fine. He's already annoyed as it is, it'll be even worse if he worries and I turn up alive and un-maimed."

Yep, there went Jack's heart again. He waved his staff and Hiccup's ice skates dissolved.

"How about I walk you home?"

* * *

><p>"So how exactly does the flying work?" Hiccup asked, trotting along as Jack floated through the air next to him.<p>

He was pretty much an endless fount of questions, not all of which Jack had answers for.

"No idea."

"And the ice magic?"

"Also no idea. The most I've figured out is that the power's inside me but I need the staff to channel it."

"Where exactly do you come from? Like which if the worlds do you live in normally? Niflheim?"

"We mostly live in the world itself, alongside all the people, hidden away. I come from a place way, waaay over the ocean."

...And one thousand years in the future, but Jack decided to leave that little detail out so Hiccup's head didn't just explode from the information overload.

"How old are you?" Hiccup asked. "You look a little bit older than me, but you're spirits, right? Are you as old as the world?"

"We're all different ages. I'm the youngest â€" I'm just three hundred and eighteen."

"How did you â€" how did you come to be?" Hiccup asked. "Did the gods create you?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you ask too many questions?"

"Pretty much all the time."

There went Jack's heart again.

"I used to be human once," he said quietly, deciding to answer Hiccup's question instead of making him feel bad for asking it. "We all did."

Hiccup looked surprised at that and looked over at Jack curiously.

"How did you become a spirit?"

Jack was quiet for a moment, reflective, but decided to answer that one, too. It was still something he was coming to grips with but the past was past, and it was as much a source of strength as a source of sadness.

"My sister and I were ice-skating on a pond and the ice started to crack under her feet. I managed to keep her calm and get her away from it, with this â€" He held up the staff "- but it meant I was the one that moved over the thin ice."

"What happened?" Hiccup asked.

"I fell in," said Jack, "and I died â€"

Hiccup immediately jumped two feet back away from Jack. "Wait, you're dead? You're a draugr?"

"A what?"

"A draugr, like â€" like a spirit corpse-monster that â€"

"No! No, I'm not like a walking corpse or anything." Jack hoped. He'd never really given it much thought, but he still breathed and his heart still beat, even if his blood was as cold as glacial water. "See the moon?"

Jack pointed up with his pointer finger.

"There's a spirit in the moon that watches over the world, especially all the kids in it. He saw that I saved my sister and he thought it was brave, so he made me into a spirit too, so I could help watch over all the kids in the world."

Hiccup relaxed now, his fears of being eaten by undead revenants seemingly assuaged.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing he said.

"For what?" asked Jack.

"That you died. Even if you got a second chance, that must have been horrible."

Jack thought about it. "I didn't remember living for a long time, so at the very least I didn't go looking for my family. Mostly, I just enjoyed the ice thing and â€" just made my own way, I guess. The only part that was bad was that no one could see me. With us spirits, at least the kind that me and the others are, no one can see or hear us if they don't believe we're real, which, of course, makes it hard to convince them we're real. I was stuck that way for a long time."

"How long?"

Jack let out a little puff of air. "Three hundred years, give or take?"

Hiccup stopped dead in the snow. "Let me get this straight. You

drowned â€" which is a fairly terrifying way to go â€" then got reanimated with no memories of your life, then spent three hundred years entirely alone?"

"Thank you for summing that up," Jack said a mite sarcastically.
"Yes, why?"

"I thought I had it bad," said Hiccup, eyes wide, starting to walk again.

Jack couldn't help but laugh at the way he said it, all wide-eyed astonishment, but the laughter faded, and he said, "It sounds like you have it bad in a different way. Me, I got mired down in my own mistakes, but I never really had anyone telling me I was a disappointment or anything like that, even if I thought it about myself sometimes. I just never got the answers I needed about what I was."

"Yeah, well, we're not so different with the getting mired in our mistakes thing. At least saving your sister is a big deal, though. Getting chosen by some great moon spirit for that shows that there's a lot of good in you. Even how you've been treating me, that's â€"

He broke off, looking unsure what words to put to that, as if being treated like someone enjoyed his company was too alien a concept.

"I'm not like that," Hiccup finally said. "I'm not really the kind of person that could save somebody else. Sometimes I get into trouble and can't even save myself; my dad has to jump in and go a little crazy with the business end of his hammer. So, really, I understand why everyone sees me the way they do. I just have to â€" I have to do something to prove to them I can be â€" that I can be something worthwhile."

"Why?" asked Jack, wanting to poke and prod at that line of thinking.

"Why what?"

"Why do you have to prove it? Do you really think the only thing to someone is their ability to smack a dragon in the head with an axe? Don't you think there's a problem if that's all your people care about?"

"It's the Viking way and I'm a Viking."

"Sometimes the best way to be something you want to be is to go at it from a different angle, to be that thing as yourself." Jack snagged Hiccup's arm with the crook of his staff and landed next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Look at you: Running right into trouble when our sleigh crashed, not even knowing what we were - that takes guts. Asking all these questions because you want to know about the world shows you've got a good brain. Wanting to fix things for your village - I know part of it is wanting them to not be mad at you, but you said you also just wanted them to have a good holiday, too."

Hiccup nodded. "They worked hard the whole year and â€" I mean,

people like Astrid deserve â€|"

He broke off.

"I want them to be happy. I just â€| I just also want them to be happy with _me_. The problem is I can't ever seem to make that work and every time I try, something goes wrong."

"You want them to be happy even when they don't accept you. Do you know what that makes you?" Jack asked, leaning down to look Hiccup in the face.

"Pathetic?"

"A good person. Someone who feels stuck on the outside looking in who still wants the best for people, rather than being bitter and angry â€" that's a good person. There are people who don't turn out that way, you know. There are people that just let all that loneliness turn to bitterness, that want to take it out on other people."

"So I get points for not being evil. Go me," Hiccup said flatly.

"Hiccup," Jack said just as flatly.

Hiccup pressed his lips together, shrugged, and said quietly, "Sarcasm's really all I've got here. I'm not used to this. I'm not used to someone talking to me like this, actually listening to what I have to say, saying things that are actually _nice_. _Gobber's like that sometimes, but mostly affectionately annoyed. It's almost likeâ€|"

"Almost like what?"

"Having a friend?" Hiccup ventured, looking as if he was waiting for the rebuttal, for Jack to tell him they were nothing of the sort.

"I could use another friend," said Jack with a smile. "Especially one like you. I don't have that many myself."

Hiccup's eyes went wide with something akin to awe. "Okay," he finally said, turning away to keep stomping towards his house. "I know it's mostly pity, but I'll take it. I'm fine with pity-friendings."

"Hiccup, trust me. It's not pity."

Hiccup glanced back at Jack and there was a smile in his eyes even if there wasn't one anywhere else.

The trees got thinner and Jack could see an expanse of snow beyond them. Nearby, there was a fairly large wooden house on a hill, with ornate carvings all over it, and beyond that was a hilly town with smaller houses that looks very similar. They all looked fairly new.

"How long has your colony been here?" Jack asked curiously.

"Seven generations."

"Why do all the houses look new?"

"Dragons breathe fire."

"Oooh."

"That's my house over there," Hiccup pointed, waving his arms awkwardly, clapping his hands together. "You're all still going to be here tomorrow, right?"

"We'll be here, Hiccup," said Jack. "I promise. We'll help you as best as we can and we'll work out a plan of attack tomorrow."

"Right, soo, I guess I'm gonna, uh, go face the music and get to bed then." He moved towards Jack as if he was going to do something, then took a step toward the house, then turned back to Jack, then dithered againâ€|

Jack just looked amused.

"Do you want a hug? You're doing that dance that kids do sometimes when they want a hug but they feel like they're too grown up for one but don't realize the grown up thing is to get hugs whenever they want."

"I was â€" I was just â€"

Jack darted forward and wrapped his arms around the boy, pulling him in close with the hand that wasn't holding his staff. Hiccup was tense at first, teenage standoffishness clashing with a desire for affection, but relaxed in Jack's arms. Apparently, it was okay to want hugs if they were coming from a spirit that had just offered to be his friend.

"Wow," Hiccup breathed out. "Two hugs in one day and an actual friend. I should've done this prayer thing years_ago."

"Go to bed. We've got a long day tomorrow."

With that, he finally pulled away, and grinning at Jack one last time, he stomped off through the snow to the back door of the house. Jack stood there, leaning against his staff, smiling as Hiccup went. He was just about to turn back and fly to the others when he heard a loud voice bellowing from inside the house.

"Hiccup, where in Odin's name were you?!"

There was a quiet answer that was just a murmur through the walls and Jack flew over to the house, concerned, landing on the outside wall. There were no windows for him to look through to see inside, but now that he was closer, he could hear the thundering voice of Hiccup's father and Hiccup's quiet replies.

For a moment, he wondered if he should be listening in, but the way Hiccup talked about his father, he had some slight concerns that maybe something worse than disappointment was going on. If these Vikings were all so violent and brutal, and his father saw him as such a burden, what if he was hurting him or something? He just wanted to make sure it wasn't worse than Hiccup said. The verbal

stuff was bad enough.

"Out walking where?" Stoick thundered.

"Just out walking. I felt like getting away for a while."

"I told you to come back to the house. Instead you're out wandering who knows where into the wee hours of the night. I was this close to waking everyone up and getting a search party together -"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure they would've gotten out of bed for _that_."

"This isn't a joke, Hiccup! You never listen. I told you not to touch the tree, the altar, and the cart with the food and you _set fire_to all three."

"To be fair, with the food cart, you could just say I was cooking the feast a little early."

"Why can't you take responsibility for yourself? You ignore every order, anytime there's something that's important, you set fire to it or break it or blow it up, you're always underfoot â€"

"Dad, I get it."

"- always running into danger so you have to be pulled out of it â€"

"_Dad_. I get it."

"I don't have enough fingers to count the number of times you've â€" where are you going?"

"Bed."

"I'm not finished with you yet!"

"And yet I'm still going to bed. Funny how that works."

"Hiccup!"

"Night, dad."

"Well then - then go to bed!"

"That was what I was already doing. You can't turn it into you telling me to do it after the fact."

There was the sound of something creaking and then slamming shut, maybe some kind of hatched door, and Jack floated up the wall to the second floor, ear pressed against the wall.

There were no sounds of crying or anything like that, just the sounds of Hiccup getting settled for the night, but somehow that just made things worse. It was the kind of silence that came of a child holding it all in. The silence lasted almost enough for Jack to fly away but then he heard Hiccup's voice whispering in the dark.

"Hey, Odin, uh, you were listening before so I'm gonna try this again. Please, please let this work. Thank you for sending the spirits, especially that Jack guy? Weird name, but having a friend is nice. Very novel. But I'm just tossing in a bonus prayer here since I figure it can't hurt: I just really, really need this to work, because I don't know what I'm going to do if it doesn't."

Jack heard him suck in a breath and when he let it out his voice was a little shaky.

"I'm tired of making a mess of everything."

Eyes wide, Jack instinctually held a hand over his heart as he perched there on the wall of Hiccup's house. When silence finally fell, he flew back to the others under the light of the moon, wondering it was fate rather than circumstance that had seen them sent back to this particular time and this particular village.

Whatever the case, they had to set things_ right_.

2. Chapter 2

****It's the Great Spirit Sleigh, Hiccup Haddock****

by Saph

* * *

><p>Chapter 2: Hiccup, the Other Reindeer

Hiccup woke when only the palest traces of light were on the horizon. His father was already up and out of the house for the day, which was a good thing because he'd forgotten to ground him the night before. That meant Hiccup managed to grab a quick breakfast and run out the door to the woods without anyone stopping him.

Cramming his woolly hat on his head and running out the door with a hunk of bread held between his teeth, Hiccup made for the tree line, running into the woods in the direction of Mildew's abandoned cabin. Snow had fallen in the middle of the night, covering up his footprints from the night before and the usual trails through the woods were obscured so he had to pick his way through the forest carefully, using his memory of the landmarks he always went past while traipsing through the woods alone.

He'd finished the last of the bread about when he saw the cabin and stomped through the snow to the door.

Shoving the door open, he said, "Hey guys, I -"

He stopped talking when he saw the empty cabin. The fire had burned down and all that was left was some char and ash. Hiccup reached a hand down tentatively to feel it and it wasn't even warm anymore.

There was a moment that he stood in the doorway, looking and feeling lost.

Had the night before all just been in his head? Had it all been some bizarre dream? It seemed too fantastic, too _weird_ to be something his brain could kick out on its own.

If it was just a dream, it was pretty much absolutely devastating, because it meant that there was no chance to fix things. It meant there was no hope.

Right then, Hiccup heard a familiar voice through the trees. "Whoa, get that thing under control, Roger Rabbit!"

"Yeah, in case you haven't noticed, mate, it doesn't want to _be_ controlled."

"You're nervous so it's making _it_ nervous."

Hiccup wheeled around and started running in the direction of the voices. They were coming from the meadow that he'd seen them crash in, the one he'd run away from when he'd been spooked by Jack's ice magic. To Hiccup's great relief, he found the Guardians all gathered around the broken-down sleigh, only this time there were eight huge reindeer they were trying to corral into the meadow.

"Easy, Blitzen, easy," said Jack, easing the reindeer into the little impromptu pen they'd put together. "This one is Blitzen, right?"

"Comet," said North with just the briefest of glances. He was busy evaluating the sleigh.

"Those are some pretty big reindeer," said Hiccup. "Good eatin'?"

Jack turned and smiled at him when he heard his voice.

"Not for eating!" said North protectively.

"Hey, Hiccup," said Jack. "The reindeer got unhooked and got away when we crashed here. Took them a while but they finally came back."

"Ippolitov-Ivanov!" exclaimed North. "This is not looking good on the sleigh. Manny's moon magic can only do so much. Mechanical damage must fixed by hand and we are not having the right equipment."

"Lemme take a look," said Hiccup, moving in closer, standing on tiptoe to look in the gap between the sleigh's wings and its chassis. After a moment, he heaved himself up on the wing with scrawny arms and half-crawled into the gap to poke and prod.

"Ayep, I can see it. That little doodad that's holding up the retractable part, right? Looks like that weight-bearing rivet is bent out of shape. You're prob'ly gonna have to take those two rods out and replace them. Even if they can be bent back into shape, there are little fissures in the metal. Over time, that's gonna give."

"How can we do this without machine shop?"

"I could fix it," Hiccup said earnestly. "I apprentice in a forge and

I build mini siege weapons all the time. I might need a little guidance but I can forge you the new parts you need, at the very least."

Sandy raised his eyebrows at the bit with the siege weapons, as if to say 'Interesting hobby choice there.'

"You would do this for us?" North asked gently.

"Of course. You guys are helping me and even if you weren't, I wouldn't wish being stuck on Berk on anyone that wasn't born here. It's home for us, but between the absolutely charming residents, the fire-breathing reptiles, and a climate that can freeze the snot in your nose, it's not really ideal for anyone else."

Jack clapped Hiccup companionably on the back.

"That's perfect. We can all work together on the sleigh and the whole Snoggletog thing."

"Speaking of Snoggletog," said North, "we should be getting to work. I have many ideas! Jack can make ice sculptures all through town. Altar to Odin with carved wooden figures as offering, with holly and wreaths of pine. Replacement tree with lights in the branches!"

"Candles probably wouldn't be the best idea. Flammability was kind of the issue with the last tree," Hiccup pointed out.

"Who says candles? No need for candles when there is magic. That is what we will help you bring to your village, my young friend," said North, smiling at the Viking boy. "Things they have never seen before!"

* * *

><p>It was a lot to get done in a very short amount of time, but with the six of them working on it, the work seemed to fly by. When they weren't all working together on repairing the sleigh with the parts Hiccup forged and snuck into the woods, they were building things for Snoggletog, with the intention of moving them into place all at once when night fell on Snoggletog Eve.<p>

It wasn't easy when their resources were limited, but there were plenty of things that could be made from nature itself into something new and wonderful. Bunny, it turned out, was a tremendous help there, as his knowledge of plants and the natural world gave them an edge on finding things to turn into dyes and paints. Tooth was, as usual, stellar at organizing things and guiding their efforts to the utmost efficiency. Sandy, for his part, was the king of creativity, coming up with shapes and designs for them to carve into the wood of the tree they were building.

Jack's primary contribution to the proceedings seemed to be occasionally spiring Hiccup off in the middle of working to play. Sometimes he lured him away with a snowball to the head, sometimes he coaxed him into an impromptu game of hide and seek with a 'Betcha you won't be able to find me!' Sometimes he simply convinced Hiccup to stomp around with him to check out the island. If the others were bothered by Jack's incapacity to work towards a deadline, they never

said a word. In fact, it was more likely that they were never bothered at all, because every time the two boys came back to work, Hiccup was smiling broadly and he was out of breath from all the laughter.

In fact, as they all spent time with Hiccup, he opened up more and more and they found that there was someone very kind under the self-effacing sarcasm, and to say he was bright was a bit of an understatement.

"If you change this part to a ball bearing here, you'll be able to prevent a lot of wear and tear. There's too much strain on the joint as it is and that'd give it a bit more flexibility. Oh, and you might want to change the shape of the steering arm in the suspension so it's less likely to warp."

North looked at where Hiccup was dangling in the open chassis of the sleigh, then he looked towards the others.

"Are you sure we can't take him home?"

"Much as we want to, no," said Jack. "We'd have to feed him, give him water, take him for walks â€" it's just too much responsibility."

"But he is so much better at this than yetis!"

The argument wasn't a serious one. They knew they couldn't realistically bring him home with them, but the smile that brightened Hiccup's face every time they had it â€" a smile at the thought of being wanted somewhere, even if he couldn't go â€" made it an argument that was worth rehashing over and over.

Hiccup, for his part, worked tirelessly to fix up the sleigh and on the Snoggletog decorations.

"It doesn't have to be perfect," Tooth pointed out when she noticed him, at one point, painting and repainting some of the carved figures that were meant to be offerings in the altar.

"I kind of just want it to be," said Hiccup, looking at the carving reflectively.

He knew, in his heart of hearts that Astrid had been right about his efforts in dragon-hunting being selfish. Every time he failed, he messed something up and while his response was often a glib remark or a dry joke, it bothered him when the others were caught in the crossfire. It didn't bother him enough to make him stop because the desperation to fit in was even stronger, but it definitely bothered him. What kept him going, ultimately, was the hope that instead of messing things up for everyone, he'd do something right, that helped them.

At the very least, he regretted that he'd ruined things for Snoggletog when it could have waited until after the holiday. He knew he really ought to keep his screwups on a less inconvenient schedule.

"This is my way of saying I'm sorry. When you do that, shouldn't you make it clear that you mean it?" Hiccup went on, looking sidelong at

Tooth.

In response to that, she just wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

It was that, Hiccup's well-meaning nature, that attracted Jack to him like a moth to an industrial strength bug-zapper. Hiccup was utterly harmless, but not in a way that implied weakness. Rather, he was harmless in that he didn't mean anyone harm. He was harmless in that he had a sense of compassion that had apparently endured quite a bit of thoughtless ostracization with quiet resilience.

Jack found this out because Hiccup chattered away at him incessantly, about just about everything. Now that he'd found someone to talk to it seemed that the Viking couldn't stop, thoughts and opinions and ideas and keen philosophical observations bubbling out of him like a pot that was boiling over. Jack never minded it for a moment; after spending three hundred years with hardly anyone talking to him, or even noticing him, it felt good to listen to someone chatter away.

It was a quiet night, before Hiccup went home for the day, that he and Jack lay together on a frost-covered rock under the stars.

During all his years of being invisible and alone, desperate for contact, Jack had never imagined that connecting with another human being could be this easy.

He remembered a time once, long ago, that people had friendships of a different nature than they were in the modern day. Back then, it was okay for them to write letters talking about their "feverish affections," or poetry to each other. Male or female, they'd hold hands and hug, and even kiss. Overall, there was an intensity there that later became frowned on, because as usual, people had to overcomplicate things that should have stayed simple, like letting people love who they wanted how they wanted, as a friend or otherwise.

At the time, Jack thought it looked nice but never been able to be in a position to experience it himself. Now he was, right here, a thousand years in the past, and while Hiccup lacked the requisite parts (and if Jack was really honest with himself, the feathers) for him to be romantically interested in him, Jack understood that whole "romantic friendship" thing now. He understood the letters and the hugging and the endless talking. He understood wanting someone else to get what they wanted and needed to be happy. For instance, whenever Hiccup talked about Astrid, who he clearly had a crush on, Jack had the overwhelming urge to try to play matchmaker when it was something he'd never had a lick of interest in before.

Jack wanted to stay here in this place, where he was trying to know someone else and be known, where they hovered between friendship and brotherhood and some other intangible something, for as long as he could.

Most of all, he just wanted more time. There was nothing worse than having best friend material dropped in your lap and understanding there was only so much time to cram a lot of friendship in.

"You know, I never really thought about it that way?" said Jack, in answer to one of Hiccup's observations. "But sometimes I do that, too. Like where you have that moment where you step back and just realize you're staring out from your own body. Like, oh look, this is a hand. My eyes are looking at it and I'm this giant bag of like bones and skin and all that, looking out at the world and I have a hand that can move and touch things when I want it to."

Jack held up a pale hand and splayed it out, looking at the stars between his fingers.

"It's weird, isn't it?" said Hiccup, holding up his hand and splaying it out, too. "Sometimes I'll sit there and something will happen and I'll think 'I'm going to remember this moment, I'm going to decide to remember it, even if it's boring, even if nothing really happened' so that I can look back on it later and realize that time passed and the whole world shifted. Then that specific time is gone and you're at a new one and you realize everything's moving, especially time."

"I know what you mean by that time thing. It was weird for me when I woke up in the pond because it was all so new," said Jack, lowering his hand. "Since I remembered words and ideas and all the things I knew but not who I was, I looked out at the world like I was living just in each moment. So I felt myself inside my own head like that all the time. In some ways, it was great because you can feel so much joy when you're doing that. In everything. In flying on the wind, in sunrises and sunsets, in the way the leaves look when they land on water. You can hear a kid laugh and for a second that's the whole world, a kid laughing because of you, because you started a snowball fight. The downside is it's hard to look inward and figure out who you are, if you're just reacting to everything rather than thinking about it. I spent a long, long time figuring myself out, and I kept looking for answers from outside myself instead of inside myself."

"Do you know who you are now?" asked Hiccup.

"Mostly. I don't think anyone knows everything they are at any time though. That's one thing I figured out, that since you're always changing and parts of you are always new, you can't know yourself once and it all stays the same forever. But North taught me that people have all these layers, and in the middle, they have their center. Once you know what it is it makes things easier."

"What's that even supposed to mean, having a center?"

Jack sat up and turned to face Hiccup where he lay, his arms folded behind his head.

"It's like this. Imagine there's like...a bunch of hollow wooden dolls, each inside the other, and you can open each one up to see a smaller one inside."

"Okay."

"So imagine I've got one in my hand, and it looks like me. It's my doll, and each one is a layer of me. The layer on the outside is maybe the cockiness. It's the way I act confident all the time. It's how I carry myself, like I don't need anyone."

He knew now that it wasn't his true self but that self-protective front was still deeply ingrained. It was part of him and some parts of it echoed with truth. He could be rash and overconfident at times. Jack mimed taking a doll apart.

"So you take that one apart and you see the next doll underneath. Maybe this one is, I don't know, how nice I can be. Maybe it's the part of me that's friends with the other Guardians - that's friends with you now. It's quiet, but it's the part of me that likes being around other people."

"The part that's been in play all this time that you've been nice to me," Hiccup pointed out. "Where you want to be friendly with people."

"Exactly. It's as much a part of me as the part that can take care of himself."

Jack mimed taking apart another doll.

"Then there's the part of me you haven't seen much of. There's the part where I'm tough and stubborn and don't back down from a fight. Even a little vicious. Sometimes it's a good thing and sometimes it gets me into trouble."

Another layer.

"Then there's the part where -" He hesitated here. "There's the part that's how lonely I was, and unsure, and sometimes angry. It's the part that's afraid of things. I don't always like that part of me but it's there."

He moved on before Hiccup asked questions about it, reached into the pocket of his hoodie, took out something small, and said, "Then, at the very center, there's this."

He tossed it to Hiccup, who nearly fumbled and dropped it in the dark. The only light they had right now was the dim light of the moon so the Viking sat up and held what was in his hand directly in the moonlight. He took a good, long look at the little painted figure he now held, his eyebrows raising when he saw that it was painted to look like Jack.

Then his face took on a sardonic expression that was obvious to Jack even in the dim light.

"At the center, there's a tiny, wooden baby?"

Jack laughed so hard at the fact that Hiccup had said that same thing that he had once said that it echoed a bit through the little cove they were perched at the edge of.

"Look at his face," Jack finally said, his voice still tinged with mirth. "What do you see?"

"He's...happy."

"Like he's having fun - as much fun as a tiny, wooden baby can have anyway."

Jack held out his hand and Hiccup tossed the figure back.

"That's what's at my center, someone that has fun, someone that likes to help other people have fun. I like it when there's joy in the world. I like to cause it, to protect it in people - especially kids. I like to live in each moment of it that I see."

"So...what's at my center?" Hiccup asked.

"What do you think is there?"

"Probably failure? Maybe a bit of social awkwardness - and can 'loserness' be an actual substance at the center of something?"

Jack's face fell. "Do you think I'd be friends with a loser?"

Hiccup's eyes reflected the light of the moon and stars a bit more sharply. "No."

"Then what do you think is there?"

"I dunno. I guess maybe someone who's kinda smart. At least for around here."

"You're smart for anywhere," said Jack. "In the last few days of talking to you, I've heard more original ideas than I've ever heard in my life. I've talked about stuff with you I never would have thought of on my own, even if I lived a million years."

"I guess I'm an okay person, too."

"More than okay."

"I wish it felt that way all the time instead of just when I hang out with you," Hiccup said ruefully.

"It can, if you let it," said Jack, tucking the wooden figure back in his pocket. "Do you wanna know what I see? What I see shining out from under all the other layers? I might be wrong about it being your center - only you can really decide that for yourself - but I think I have something of an idea, at least."

"What do you see?" Hiccup asked, hesitantly, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Flexibility. I see compassion and someone that sees the world a different way from most people. I see someone that tries to see it in new ways. You explore things and you explore people." Jack leaned in to look Hiccup in the eyes. "And let me tell you something: living three hundred plus years has taught me that it's those kinds of people that are the ones that change the world for the better."

Hiccup looked like he was on the verge of tears now and he sat there almost rocking back and forth for a moment, his movements hesitant, before he rocked forward enough for his head to thud against Jack's shoulder. Jack pulled him close, a hand resting on the back of his head, thumb rubbing gently against the fabric of his woolly

hat.

"Why do you have to leave?" Hiccup finally asked. "You're fixing the sleigh so you can leave after you help me, aren't you."

"Yeah, we are, and we have to because - because we were taken from really far away. Really, really far away, and we have to go back to help other kids. We also can't really exist here. We're the best ones to help someone like you with all this, but we're not really made to be here, you know? It might hurt us if we stay too long. It's spirit stuff."

"Will you ever be able to come back?"

Jack's miserable silence was answer enough and Hiccup finally wrapped his arms around him.

"I wish you could have lived here," said Hiccup. "Well, no, like I said before, I wouldn't wish Berk on most people, but I wish wherever we both lived, it had been the same time and place."

"Look at it this way, me and the others are spirits, right?" Jack said, voice cracking just slightly. "That means we're really good at that whole being somewhere in spirit thing. Or with some_one_."

Hiccup finally let go of Jack and fell back to lay on the rock. Jack joined him, shoulder to shoulder, and Hiccup leaned his head in close. After a moment Jack hooked his arm through Hiccup's just because.

"Tell me what you guys call the constellations here," said Jack, nudging his shoulder against Hiccup's. "Then when I'm back home and looking at the sky, I can think of them as being the same ones you're seeing."

"Okay, well, see that shape right there?" said Hiccup, pointing upward. "That's Neely the Voluptuous. Bit of a bawdy story behind that one, apparently, but my dad always tells Gobber to shut up when he tries to tell me it."

"With a name like that, I can imagine," said Jack, raising an eyebrow.

"And that's Hurg the Hunter right there. Those three stars are his belt and that's his club that he uses to fight dragons. Over there is Bjorn the Batterer, with his dragon-cleaving sword. And that's the - _dragon_."

"I'm noticing a definite recurring theme here -" Jack started to say but Hiccup shushed him.

"No, there's a _dragon_," he whispered, his voice anxious. "Above us right now. Don't move. Don't speak."

Jack saw it now, a dark shape zipping overhead, moving through the sky in one liquid streak of darkness, a shadow briefly blocking the stars. He stayed silent as he lay there with Hiccup, though he did move just a little, inching his hand out just enough to grasp his staff where it lay next to him. It streaked overhead about two more

times and Jack could just vaguely hear wings flapping on the wind, but only because the wind was his friend even in this time like it was in his own time, and it carried the sound to his ears. Otherwise, the shadow in the sky would have likely been silent.

Then, just as quickly as it came, it was gone.

When Hiccup was sure he didn't see it overhead, he sat up, looking up at where it'd been, face beaming excitement.

"It was probably scouting."

"Does that mean your village is going to be attacked?"

"Soon, prob'ly, but it'll be impossible to predict when. Might be a few days, might be a few weeks. There's never really a pattern to it." He looked excited and was still looking up into the sky. "I think that was a Night Fury!"

"A Night Fury?"

"It's one of the rarest and most dangerous dragons. No one's ever seen one or at least if they have, they haven't lived to tell the tale. They say it's the offspring of _lightning and death _itself," Hiccup said gravely.

"Okay, one, I didn't know lightning and death could have offspring, and two...you Vikings really do have a flair for the dramatic, do you know that?"

* * *

><p>It took several days of painstaking labor - and Hiccup sneaking things out of the forge - but eventually the sleigh and the Snoggletog decorations were finished. Jack had to admit, for the limited material they'd had on hand, they looked pretty great. The tree had been built out of wood, designs scored all over its surface by Sandy's dream sand, green and red and blue dyes used to stain it and give it color. Little metal ornaments and baubles had been forged by Hiccup to put on it. Round river stones had been attached to it and somehow North had done something to them so that they glowed with a clear, sparkling light.<p>

The altar to Odin that they'd put together vaguely reminded Jack of a nativity scene, but the figures inside it weren't the shepherds and wise men he was used to seeing. There were little figures of carved fish and goats and pigs, as if instead of offering material food they were replacing it with a sacrifice of the effort that had gone into carving them. Tooth had gone above and beyond with the figures of birds that they'd made, plucking some of her own feathers to put on them, creating a bright splash of color and making them look almost real.

There were also wreaths with holly and mistletoe and and strings of colorful wooden baubles on vines to put on doors and hang from the village's torches.

Hiccup was grinning as he looked on it all, his eyes wide with wonder and his face full of pride for the part he'd had in it. For though the Guardians had helped him put it all together, his touches were

everywhere, in some of the carved designs, in the metal baubles on the tree that he'd forged in secret along with the parts of the sleigh, in the colored stain that had been painstakingly painted on everything.

Part of him was in every part of it and it was the best gift possible he could give to the village, not just to try to get their approval, but to show how much he cared about them and how sorry he was for every mistake he'd ever made.

"It's perfect," he said. "We couldn't really do anything about the feast this year, but at least we'll be able to give them this."

"Actually," said North. "My magic sack can help with the food. Usually, is just for holding things much bigger than it is, but sometimes, when I have need, it puts out things that are just the right gift at just the right time. Last time I opened it, smell of roast turkey came out."

Hiccup bounced in place at that. "Oh my gods, this is perfect. All of this is perfect. How are we going to move it all, though?"

"Don't worry," said Jack. "You can leave all that to us. Meet us at the edge of the woods after nightfall, okay? Then we'll make this a Snoggletog they'll never forget."

* * *

><p>Jack decided that the best way to go about this was to let Hiccup have a bird's eye view of it. After the sun set and everyone in the village had gone inside to get away from the cold, Hiccup and Jack walked into the center of the village.<p>

"Shouldn't we be helping?"

"I'm gonna help the others in a second. What you get to do is watch." Jack held out his hand. "Ready?"

Hiccup reached out and clasped his hand in Jack's own. They both lifted off the ground and up into the air.

"Oh. Oh, the ground. The ground isn't supposed to be down any farther than my feet," Hiccup babbled nervously.

"Would I let you fall?" With that, Jack flew Hiccup up to the roof of a nearby building in the plaza and set him down gently. "Time for the grand event, my friend, and you get the best seat in the house."

Hiccup settled in, taking a seat and looking down with curiosity at the plaza below. Jack flew off and waited at the center. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, a massive hole appeared in the ground where the old tree had been before the wreckage had been cleaned away and the top of the wooden Snoggletog tree poked out through it.

"Are we in the right spot?" Bunny called up.

"It's perfect," called Jack. "Bring it up."

The tree rose out of the ground on a cloud of yellow sand and the Guardians rose out with it.

"I'm gonna close it up around the base, Sandy," said Bunny, "don't bring it any higher."

There was the tree, sparkling in the night, even bigger and better than the last one had been. After it was in place, the replacement altar was brought up next, then a table with a full Snoggletog feast that Hiccup hadn't even seen yet. After it was all in place, the Guardians that could fly started flying around, spreading the wreathes and garlands all over the plaza. Sandy smiled widely at Hiccup as he flew by, stringing garland over the building he was sitting on.

After it was all finished, North looked up at Jack.

"Ready to add the coup of the gra, Jack?"

Jack grinned a grin that was almost wild and started to fly through Berk, spreading his frost everywhere. It was only a light dusting, more cosmetic than anything, and in his own humble opinion, it was the best work he'd ever done. The ice spread out in beautiful fractal shapes and elegant spirals, covering every building and structure in the village. Here and there, ice sculptures sprang up, of snowflakes and stars and other elegant designs that were without specific form, created just to look beautiful. Jack flew back around to the center of the plaza and then flying upward in a rush of wind, he went into a spiral, staff outstretched.

When he floated down, there were gentle flurries of snow floating down with him.

Hiccup felt a single cold snowflake land on his nose and Jack flew over, floating in front of him.

"Happy Snoggletog, Hiccup." Then he moved to the side. "So, what do you think?"

"It's amazing," said Hiccup slowly, breathless as he looked out on it all. Then he looked over at Jack and at the Guardians floating in the air and standing on the ground below. "You guys are amazing."

Jack held out his hand again and floated Hiccup down from the roof.

"We're going to go off and hide. It's a spirit thing, you know? We can't just walk around in broad daylight in front of people. Why don't you get everyone out for the feast?"

Hiccup nodded happily and the five Guardians went to the top of the Great Hall, Sandy floating North and Bunny up there on a golden cloud. Then Hiccup started banging on doors and shouting.

"Happy Snoggletog, everyone! It's Snoggletog! Come on out and get your fill of the feast!"

The Vikings of Berk started to walk out of their doors, their eyes widening as they saw the spread, the tree, the altar, and the decorations. Their voices were hushed in wonder and awe and then

started to rise into sounds of laughter and celebration.

"It's a miracle! It's a Snoggletog miracle!" someone called out.

Stoick walked out of the Great Hall and down the steps, his jaw gaping as he saw it.

"What â€" what is all this? Who did this?"

"It's a miracle!" said Gobber. "Odin must have taken pity on us and decided to let us have Snoggletog anyway!"

"It wasn't Odin â€" well, I guess it was Odin indirectly, but I did it," Hiccup chimed up and every eye in the village was now on him. "Or at least I helped. Do you like the little figures in the altar? I put a lot of work into some of those."

"Hiccup, you couldn't have done all this by yourself," said Stoick.

"I had help from my friends," Hiccup said, trying to figure out if he should explain and how to even do it. "I prayed to Odin for help with fixing Snoggletog after I ruined it and five spirits came down from the sky and â€"

"Hiccup," said his father and instead of pride or astonishment, for some reason there was disappointment in his voice. "I didn't raise you to lie."

"I'm not lying," Hiccup insisted, taken aback.

"Why do they think he's lying?" Jack hissed, where he hid with the other Guardians on the rock face that made up the roof of the Great Hall. "Why would he lie about something like that?"

"I don't understand," said Bunny. "Look at the little mite, can't they see he's telling the truth? It's all over his face."

"You're taking credit for something you obviously didn't do." Stoick shoved Hiccup to the side in the thoughtless way he always did and looked out on the crowd. "Alright, who did this? Mulch and Bucket, was it you? It had to be more than one of you."

"No, dad, dad it was me, me and my new friends â€"

"What friends?" Snotlout chimed in. "Who'd want to be friends with _you_?"

At that, the twins tittered with laughter and the older Vikings shook their heads, but it was clear they weren't shaking them at the twins.

At that, Jack started to stand up and fly down from the roof but North grabbed him by the hoodie before he could.

"Jack, we can't interfere in this."

"But they're â€"

"Is not how the story goes. No mention ever of us."

At that, Jack turned to look at North with his eyes narrowed.

"The story? What story? What are you talking about?"

"His name, when he first told it, is familiar to me," said North. "No time to explain now, but you must trust me on this. We must not interfere or bad things could happen."

"Whoever did this, I don't know why you want to keep it secret, but thank you," said Stoick to the crowd, completely ignorant of the fact that Hiccup was shaking his head miserably behind him. Jack could barely stand it. It was as if none of them could see that Hiccup's expression was utterly devastated. "It looks like we get to celebrate Snoggletog this year after all!"

The Vikings all cheered and headed over to tuck into the feast, leaving Hiccup standing there, casting about fitfully as if he'd just been robbed. His father took him aside, roughly, by the shoulder, and even on the roof of the hall, they could hear his tense words booming up to them.

"Hiccup, how could you take credit for someone else's work?"

"Dad, I didn't"

"I didn't raise you this way! I didn't raise you as someone that would spread lies about doing something another hard-working Viking has done. There's no way you could have moved that tree on your own and there's no one"

"There's no one, what?" Hiccup shot back, anger tinging his voice. Stoick looked somewhat taken aback.

"No one that would help me, right?" said Hiccup. "Because I'm Hiccup the Useless, and who would want to help me, when I ruin everything?"

Jack started to tug away from North again, but he wasn't letting go of Jack's shirt anytime soon and when he caught Jack's eye, he hissed, "Jack, I know you want to be helping him, but please, please trust me on this. You will cause more harm than good."

The problem was, Jack did trust North, and he remembered the look that had been on his face when Hiccup had told them his name. At the time, he hadn't given it much thought, but now it was clear that North knew something the rest of them didn't, and Jack did trust that there was some way going down there could cause Hiccup harm.

Jack stayed where he was, flattened against the stone, but the only way he was able to do it was by punching the roof to let out his frustration.

Down below, Stoick looked less angry now and more troubled by the fact that his son looked so troubled. Hiccup, in the meantime, was watching a village and a tribe celebrate, knowing that he'd never be a part of it.

"Son, I know you feel guilty about ruining the holiday, but this

isn't the way to â€" Hiccup, where are you going?"

The boy had started to stomp away.

"Hiccup!"

Now Hiccup started to run, into the woods.

North's grip slacked and Jack finally tore away. He flung himself off the roof now and flew down after Hiccup, dodging between buildings so he wasn't seen. It wasn't long before he caught up with him, standing motionless on the snow-covered trail, away from the village, but not far beyond the treeline.

"Hiccup?" Jack said gently. "Hiccup, we saw what happenedâ€|"

Hiccup wasn't crying. After something like that, most children and even most teens would've been crying, but he wasn't. That worried Jack more than if he had been.

"I don't suppose you can talk to them, can you? Let them know you helped me?"

"North says something bad will happen. I don't really know what he means but he knows something â€"

"Right. Something bad. Spirit stuff. That's nice and vague. That's pretty convenient, actually," Hiccup said sardonically, with a dismissive shrug.

"Convenient?"

The other Guardians had caught up to them now and touched down behind Jack. He looked to them, wordlessly entreating them to help him.

"I understand what this is now," said Hiccup, lifting a hand and dropping it, as he turned to face them. What was frightening about his expression was that it wasn't sad, it wasn't hurt, it just wasn'tâ€|anything. It was the expression of someone overwhelmed by a misery so deep that his face had just given up on trying to express it in any way.

Instead, his sadness came out in the hollowness of his voice.

"What do you mean?" Jack asked slowly, tilting his head in alarm.

"I asked Odin for a sign," the Viking said shakily. "I asked himâ€|to help me fix the holiday, and for â€" for proof things would get better." Hiccup held out his arms and dropped them. "Pretty good sign, I'd say. Loud and clear, thank you, Odin."

"A sign of what? What do you think it's a sign of?"

"Odin did this. You heard what they said â€" it's a miracle. It's a miracle, which means he did it himself, and I think I justâ€| I think maybe I've gone a little crazy."

"What - I don't â€"

"I've gone crazy, which, when you get down to it, was probably

inevitable anyway. I mean, I'm weird enough, I don't fit in, there's probably plenty of crazy in there. Why wouldn't there be one more reason I don't belong here? I'm sure they'll all be happy if they find out â€" they'll finally have a reason to ship me off to sea."

"You're not crazy. What makes you think you're crazy?" Jack asked.

Hiccup's eyes met his. "Because you're not real."

Jack recoiled as if he'd been slapped, shoulders rising and falling as he drew in hitched breaths.

"Why would you say that?" he said, his voice thick.

"You're not real. Odin fixed it, by himself, and made it so I'd have no part in it. Because I'm not meant â€" I'm not meant to ever have a part in it. And I imagined this. That's â€" that's what happened." Hiccup waved his arms around at all of them. "I imagined aaall of this. I mean, Snotlout's right, who'd want to be friends with _me_?"

"Why do you think you imagined us?" asked Tooth softly, her voice overwhelmed with sadness.

Hiccup looked to Jack. If his face hadn't known to express what he was feeling before, apparently, it had finally figured out how to do it now, and to Jack seeing it was like being shot in the heart.

"You can't be real, because â€" because the only way someone would like me, the only way someone would want to be my friend," said Hiccup slowly "â€" was if I made them up in my head."

"Hiccupâ€" |"

"I'm never going to belong here. I'm never going to belong anywhere."

With that, he started to stumble off back towards his house.

"Hiccup, come back. Where are you going?" asked Jack.

"I need to go work on my list of sheep names."

"Hiccup, please," Jack said, flying over and grabbing him by the arm.

Hiccup just shook him off. "You're not real. You're not realâ€" |"

He broke into a run and that was his litany as he ran away, leaving the Guardians shocked â€" and in Jack's case, utterly heartbroken â€" on a snowy trail in the moonlight.

3. Chapter 3

****A/N**:** You're going to hate me for the cliffhanger. NO REGRETS.

* * *

><p>Dovahkin: Down, boy! LOL. I'm afraid the end of the story isn't going to be that blood and thunder, but I promise it'll be a satisfying ending. And while I appreciate the sentiment, you don't need to worry about other reviewers, I've got a thick skin. (Also, I'm a ma'am, not a sir). I'm glad you're so enthusiastic about the story, though. It always makes me happy if something I write gets people passionate.

****Matt:**** I'm not sure how you missed the part where I explain that time travel took place. It's in the very first chapter. Complaining about the Guardians being in Hiccup's time is like complaining about Marty McFly wearing Calvin Klein in the 1950's in Back to the Future. Time travel's kinda the whole point.

****XphiaDP:**** Don't worry, this chapter explains it a bit. Basically, just because someone says they don't believe in something doesn't mean it really happens in their head right away. Belief can be something that's hard to let go of entirely.

****Syrlai:**** I do understand that there's a glut of shipping in fanfiction and that a lot of it is slash, which is why I tend to write genfics focusing on plot and other types of relationships like friendships and familial relationships, but I'm not sure I like how you worded that, saying slash would "ruin" a story. I do write and read slash in other fandoms, like BBC's Sherlock, even if I don't post the fics here. It isn't "crap" and it isn't something "ruins" stories, it's just another type of relationship. If you're just trying to express being bummed over the fact that it's hard to find stories that have other types of relationships, I understand that, but you might want to check your wording. And if you're slamming slash just because you think it's gross, that's kind of hateful, and you might want to check yourself. I appreciate the compliments and I'm sorry if this comes off worded harshly at all, but the way you worded that made me really uncomfortable and I felt the need to make it clear that I do support "that kind of relationship," whether in fiction form or, much more importantly, RL.

* * *

><p>It's the Great Spirit Sleigh, Hiccup Haddock

by Saph

* * *

><p>Chapter 3: Yes, Hiccup, There Is a Santa Claus

After a miserable night for the Guardians, Jack sat on a tree branch as the sun rose and the first bit of pale light spilled over the horizon. There was mostly silence for hours, but by midday, the others were fussing over the reindeer and the sleigh - and over the fact that North, Jack, and Bunny had lost their only believer in this time.

"I can already feel it," said Bunny, and it made sense that he was feeling the ill effects of it the worst since the physical changes

for him were so pronounced. "One believer's hardly enough to keep us going as is, and moving all those decorations took a lot out of us. We're not going to last long."

A very tired North was sitting on a tree stump from one of the trees they'd cut down to make the pen for the reindeer.

"Only one more day until piece of moon is ready. We might be able to make it."

Jack already felt the energy seeping out of him and it was a frightening thing. Even at his weakest, before he was a Guardian, he'd always felt fine. The price he paid for having no believers has been steep, but being invisible to everyone had never actually hurt him physically. Now, he felt himself fading slowly, only it seemed to him that it was the world that was fading away from him instead.

Yet, despite how frightening it was, that wasn't the thing that was foremost on his mind.

"What story were you talking about, North?" Jack finally asked from where he sat on a tree branch above them. He'd been stewing on it through the whole night. "You said there was a story and we weren't a part of it. What story?"

"Is story I read once. Hiccup is part of it, I think, if he is same Hiccup in story."

"Why does it mean we can't show ourselves and help him? If we can get them to see us and prove he helped with all the decorations - "

"We are not in story. If we showed ourselves, it is the kind of thing that would be in such a story. It could ruin his future," said North. "It could ruin _the _future, our future, the future of world. Helping with Snoggletog without them knowing was one thing, but anymore than that could be changing the course of a life! It could be changing the course of history!"

Jack suddenly dropped down from the branch and letting out a loud cry, he waved his staff in a wide arc and with a flash of blue, an entire tree was felled by the ice blast it released. Even though Jack felt weaker, the cold anger he felt inside had been fuel enough to cause damage.

"What good are we as Guardians if we can't help one kid?" Jack yelled, waving his arms outward, the arc of his staff almost hitting Bunny as he did it.

The others were looking at him with concern after his sudden outburst, and feeling miserable over Hiccup, and ashamed over losing his temper, Jack turned away from the worried faces of the others and took to the air.

"Jack, you can't -" North started.

"I can't interfere, I know, but I have to at least see if he's okay."

Jack flew off before they could say anything else, into town, hopping

from roof to roof cautiously, making sure he wasn't seen, just in case he wasn't entirely invisible yet. It took a little bit of time for their power to fade when the belief was gone. He wasn't sure where Hiccup would be at first; maybe at his house, but there were no windows for him to look in to see.

Then he remembered that Hiccup spent a lot of time in the forge and he hunted for that until he found it. Hiding on the roof of a nearby building, he looked in through the opening of the stall and saw Hiccup working silently on fixing a pot. Immeasurable sadness had a subtle touch on every line of his face, but for the most part his expression held the same blankness that had frightened Jack when they'd been standing on the trail the night before.

After finishing his work, Hiccup sat there on a stool doing nothing for a little while, staring at a wall, and then, seeming to come to a decision, he got up and went over to a little work table in the back. Jack climbed down to a lower part of the roof he was hiding on to have an unobstructed view and saw that there were pictures tacked all over the wall at his worktable, of what looked like drawings of birds and other animals and of clever little mechanical devices. Some looked like weapon plans and Jack thought he recognized one or two of them because of Hiccup describing to them what they were and how they were supposed to work. Even in the short time Jack had known him, he knew that those drawings and plans were undeniably Hiccup in nature, his heart and soul poured onto the paper.

That was why he gasped in shock when he saw Hiccup taking them all down to throw them - and part of himself - away in the forge's hearth. There was a moment that he hesitated, looking at them all as he held them near the fire, the blank expression temporarily cracking and a softer one full of deep sadness taking its place.

Then his face went blank again and he lifted up the papers to throw them into the fire.

Jack had only a moment to take action, raising his staff and muttering to himself, "C'mon, >wind..."<p>

A sudden gust of wind blew through the forge, tearing all the papers from Hiccup's hands just before they fell into the fire. They danced up into the air and Jack flew up and caught them one by one, gathering them all in his arms, before diving down to hide on the roof again.

Disturbed, Hiccup ran over and looked out the window, expecting to see them scattered on the ground. Jack ducked down so that he wouldn't be seen and after Hiccup saw that the papers were nowhere in sight, he simply shrugged half-heartedly and went back to his work. On the roof, Jack sat down and organized the papers into a neat pile, smoothing them out and looking at each of them. There were quite a few of some sort of device that seemed to be designed to throw large bolas that Hiccup had taken quite a bit of care with, and some small, secret drawings of a blonde girl Jack had seen in the crowd around the Snoggletog tree the night before, that he knew _had _to be Astrid.

The last picture he looked at made him breathe in sharply. Rendered in pencil with the utmost care was a picture of the Guardians. It was

actually quite good and Jack realized, looking back, that he'd never seen Hiccup with a pencil and paper when they'd hung out, which meant he'd drawn them all from memory. It was even more heartbreaking to see another sign of talent that was going entirely unappreciated by his village.

Jack rolled up the stack of papers carefully and shoved them awkwardly in the pocket of his hoodie. Right then, he saw Hiccup's father walk up with the large guy with the hook for a hand and peg leg. They stopped in the plaza, not far from the blacksmith's stall but far enough that Hiccup wouldn't notice them there.

"What is it you wanted to show me, Gobber?" asked Stoick.

"Look into the stall, right now," said Gobber. "What do you see?"

"It's Hiccup."

"Right," said Gobber. "It's Hiccup. Sitting quietly. Not running off to traipse across the island in the middle of his work. Not trying to build strange contraptions. Not following me around to hound me with ridiculous questions. It's Hiccup, sitting and doing something _quietly_."

"Well, that's good then, isn't it? Show good work ethic."

Hiccup was sitting at a worktable now, writing up some kind of list.

"D'you know what he's been working on all day?"

"What?"

"That's a list of the names for his sheep when he lives alone and becomes a misanthrope someday. Apparently," Gobber went on, "he seems to think replacing Mildew as the town hermit is viable career choice."

Now Stoick sighed, clapping his hand to his forehead and swiping it down his face to rub at the bridge of his nose.

"He thinks he's going to be a hermit someday?"

"Oh, aye. He's been planning out his shack and everythin'. Says it needs to be high on a cliff where no one will want to go for the proper ambiance."

"What are you trying to tell me, Gobber?"

"He's not himself."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing, is it?" Stoick hedged. "Maybe if he's not himself, that means he'll start being another self — one that doesn't get under foot, that doesn't destroy our food supplies before the winter freeze, that doesn't go chasing after dragons and nearly get eaten —"

"Stoick, it's like the light is gone from his eyes. He's a clever lad and it's wasted if he's just sitting there tinkering pots."

Admittedly, it's much better to keep that cleverness away from pointy objects and things he can build into mini death machines," acknowledged Gobber, tilting his head to the side, "and yes, there are times that our lives would be much easier if we could keep him on a leash, but it's like he's gone too far in the other direction. I've never seen him this miserable."

Stoick sighed. "If I give him free reign, he'll wreck half the island and we'll be picking him out of â€" of a Monstrous Nightmare's teeth before the end of next year. What he did last night, taking credit for all that and taking advantage of the person doing it wanting to go unknown was just -"

"Desperate," Gobber put in, pointedly.

Stoick stood there, looking at his son, pale and sad where he sat in the stall and for a moment, his face was almost a mirror of that sadness, or at least as much as a man like him could let it be.

"I justâ€¦I don't know what to _do_ with him, Gobber. How can I protect him if he never listens? How can I teach him what's right and wrong if he's willing to lie and - and blow things up to try to gain favor with the village?"

"Try _talking_ _to_ him."

"Oh, of course, that'll work," said Stoick in sardonic tones that were surprisingly similar to some of the ones that Hiccup often used. "That _always_ _turns_ out well."

"All I'm saying is if you let him run wild, yes, he'll probably die horribly in a fiery explosion of his own making," Gobber shrugged, gesturing slightly with his hook for emphasis, "but right now, he seems to think the most he's ever going to accomplish is being the next _Mildew_. There's _got_ _to_ be some kind of middle ground."

Stoick let out another sigh. "Maybe â€" maybe I should give him his Snoggletog present after all. I was going to give it to the winner of this year's sled race instead, as punishment, but it might be too much if he's being this hard on himself. And in the end, there was no harm done, since someone replaced everything that was broken. It might cheer him up."

With that, the two started to walk away and Jack was left sitting on the roof, reflecting on the entire situation. It was somehow even sadder now that he knew how at least some of the others felt about him. Clearly, his father didn't understand him and treated him terribly, but it was just as clear that he cared somewhat about his well being. And that Gobber guy seemed to care about him just as much â€" and maybe even understood him better than his dad did.

The situation was hopelessly tangled and now Jack realized it wasn't something that could have been fixed with a bunch of holiday decorations.

The problem was that he didn't know how to fix it. It seemed like it was this messy, horrible cycle of the village making Hiccup feel like he didn't belong out of casual cruelty, him wrecking things accidentally in the process of trying to prove himself, and the

villagers continuing to be cruel in response. Hiccup didn't need to actually prove himself. _Something _had to be done to definitively show them that the way they regarded him was wrong, but Jack had no idea how to make that come about.

"I am so kicking your butt in the race tomorrow," Jack heard and farther up the street, near the plaza with the tree, he saw the village's teenagers gathered. "Your butt is going to be so sore when I'm done kicking it that you won't be able to sit down for a week."

Frowning, Jack hopped quietly and carefully from building to building to listen in.

"You are not," said the blond male twin to the boy that had spoken, a stocky black-haired kid with a helmet that had curly horns on the sides. "If anyone is kicking butts tomorrow, it's me. I'm going to kick all the butts. Every single butt."

"Can you both stop saying butt already? It's starting to sound weird," said the blond girl that wasn't one of the twins, the one Jack was fairly sure was Astrid. "Besides, there's no way of knowing who's going to win until they win. It's been a different one of us that walked away with the Winner's Ham every single year since we were five."

"Well, we know which one of us _isn't_ going to win," laughed the kid Jack mentally assigned as Loudmouth. "Hiccup loses every year."

Jack only just resisted flinging a snowball right in the kid's face. As much as these brats were cruel and irritating, he was a Guardian and that meant he was supposed to be above vindictiveness where kids were concerned. They were supposed to care about and protect _all _children.

"I don't know why he keeps showing his loser face when all he ever does is lose. Like a _loser_," Loudmouth went on. He looked like he was about to say something else, but that was when the snowball hit him right in the face and knocked him right over on his rear. The twins started laughing uproariously as Loudmouth stood up and looked around, hands clenched into fists.

"Hey! Who threw that?!"

Okay, so maybe Jack wasn't as above vindictiveness as he should have been, but he was only human and it was just a snowball. No one made themselves known so Loudmouth settled down, though he looked around the frost-covered plaza with a touch more paranoia than before.

"Anyway, Hiccup isn't going to race this year. I overheard Gobber talking it over with the chief earlier," said Astrid.

"He's probably too embarrassed to show up after that stuff last night," pointed out the girl twin, who Jack mentally named Tweedledum.

Tweedledumber, the brother, added, "Yeah, I mean he totally lied about putting up all this cool stuff. There's no way he could've done it on his own. Did you see the chief's face? It was like the maddest

I've ever seen him."

"Actually, he was madder that one time that Hiccup blew up the brewery," pointed out the husky kid wearing what looked like a giant fur sack. "Or that time he accidentally netted Mulch and Bucket instead of a dragon. Or that time â€" wow, there's been a _lot_ of times he's been _really_ _mad, actually."

"I don't know, guys, there's been something I've been wondering," said Astrid, looking at the tree thoughtfully.

"What?" asked Loudmouth.

"Okay, so Hiccup can't have done all of this, right? But someone in the village did it and apparently just wants to stay anonymous. Hiccup made up that stuff about spirits and said he had friends and we all know _that's_ _not_ true -"

Jack's fingers gripped the edge of the roof more tightly.

"- but maybe whoever it was took pity on him and let him help to save face."

"Why do you think that? He's probably just lying."

Astrid reached up and plucked one of the ornaments off the tree, an ornate little metal bauble, made of thin strips of metal twisted up into a complex and beautiful pattern.

"No one knew Hiccup was going to blow up all the Snoggletog decorations, right? So no one would have been able to trade for these ahead of time for Snoggletog. They had to have been made _after_ Hiccup blew everything up. And we only have two people in town that know how to work the forge. Everyone knows Gobber can't do detailed work because of his hook and because his hand is too big; it's always Hiccup that does it. He's been working in the forge constantly this last week, too, and I swear I saw him in there after Gobber had gone home for the nightâ€|"

She held up the ornament between her thumb and forefinger. "So if there's no one else in town besides Hiccup that could have made something like thisâ€|then who made it?"

"Someone else?" said Snotlout. "You're basing this whole thing on Hiccup doing something _right_ _and_ we all know that's impossible."

"Shyeah," said Tweeldumber, getting up from where he'd been perched on a barrel. "Anyway, we should go work on our sleds. I still have to see if I can attach, like, spikes to the sides."

The teens started to walk off, chattering away to themselves, but Astrid lingered behind, looking at the many metal ornaments on the tree and at the one in her hand. Then she went over to the altar and picked up a little wooden yak. Part of it had been made out of leather that Jack remembered Hiccup stitching by hand and she looked at the tiny stitches as if she realized what small hand had tirelessly worked on them.

There was a moment that her expression went strangely soft and

wondering as she looked off in the distance at the forge and she even took a few steps in that direction.

But then one of the teens called out to her and she turned back, putting the little figure away and sticking the ornament back on its hook on the tree.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," she yelled and then she ran after them.

It was all almosts. Gobber almost understood Hiccup. Hiccup's father was almost able to show he cared. Astrid was almost willing to give him a chance.

But apparently they were all too big and tough to do more than that and too thoughtless to dig any deeper.

As Jack looked out on the village, he wondered how it could have less warmth than a spirit of winter. How could a tribe caught in the middle of the darkest, chilliest time of the year leave one of their own out in the cold?

* * *

><p>Jack stopped by the abandoned cabin to seal Hiccup's papers away in a crate there before meeting up with the others again, only to find them all resting in the cabin itself instead of around the sleigh. North looked exhausted and as weary as his age would typically suggest, shoulders slumped where he sat near the fire.<p>

As for Bunnyâ€|

"Oooh no," Jack said.

"Not. One. Word," said Bunny where he sat on the floor, looking as cross as a tiny bunny rabbit could look. He hopped a few tiny (adorable) hops closer to the fire to stay warm, settling in at Sandy's feet.

Reverting back to his tiny bunny form was to be expected under the circumstances. Though there was one thing Jack wondered as he shut the doorâ€|

"Okay, I have a question," said Jack, briefly looking at the pencil portrait of the Guardians again before he put the papers in the crate. "We're losing power, right? The three of us don't have any believers anymoreâ€|so how are we even still here? Losing believers hit you guys hard and fast last time."

"No idea, mate," said Bunny.

"Hiccup still saw me as he walked away, too. Shouldn't I have faded right then and there? Become invisible, at the very least?"

It had been bothering him all night and day, niggling at his brain. They weren't exactly batteries. Yes, it took a little bit of time for them to lose power and fade when they lost believers, but there was a reason Jamie had been so important in the fight against Pitch. Without him, the Guardians would have been no more.

"It's possible he's of two minds about it," suggested Tooth. "Choosing to no longer believe in something isn't always an instantaneous decision for everyone. Sometimes it takes time for them to really let go. And he has reasons more than most to not want to think we're just imaginary, despite what he said."

Jack hopped up and perched on the back of a chair.

"Then we still have an in."

"What we've got is a no-win situation," said Bunny. "We'll be lucky if we make it 'til morning. We should maybe consider leaving tonight and hoping the magic is ripe enough."

"Aren't you supposed to be the Guardian of Hope?" Jack pointed out.

"When I'm this small, I'm prey," Bunny pointed out. "Which means I also pull double duty as the Guardian of Pragmatism."

"Bunny may have point," said North, sadly. "About trying to leave tonight. If magic is not enough to take us home, may at least take us to future time where we have more believers and children to possibly convince to believe in you, Jack. Then we can try another go to get to right time, since Manny will still be there."

"We're not leaving Hiccup like this."

"Jack â€"

"We're not," Jack insisted. "We have to figure out a way to help him before we go."

"Jack," said Tooth, "this situation is complicated. It might be too complicated for us to help with before we run out of time. Things that involve problems in a family or a community are harder to -"

"I don't care how hard it is. We're helping him."

"You might be taking this a little personally, mate," said Bunny.

"Yeah, so maybe I am!" Jack said, hopping off the chair. "I know what it's like to feel invisible. I know what it's like to be alone, to not have a friend in the world, to feel like you mess things up all the time." He gestured at the others with his staff. "So maybe I am taking this personally, but he's a kid and he's in trouble, so maybe you should be, too."

Sandy pursed his lips up thoughtfully but then jerked his head towards Jack, looked to the others, and nodded in agreement with Jack. Then, true to their nature as Guardians, they all nodded their agreement, too. Life was risk and they were willing to risk it all to help a child in need.

"Aaaah, you're right," said Bunny. "It's just hard to think anything's possible through this lethargy. I feel like my paws are made of lead. But we need a plan and we need one quicksharp or we won't last long enough to do a thing to help."

"There must be some way we can change how village sees Hiccup," said North. "Some way to give him chance to shine, a way that he can have as all his own."

Jack's eyes suddenly widened. "There's a sled race, tomorrow. I overheard the other kids talking about it. Apparently, it's a big deal, they do it every year. Hiccup's never won it before and â€" and that's a positive way to get attention, right? It's not something they can think someone else did, it's not something that causes harm. He'd just be the fastest, get the ham, and be a winner for a day. Even if it's just a small thing, maybe it'll give him hope that things can get better. That might help him keep afloat until they actually do. If we can help him winâ€|"

A yellow ham suddenly appeared in the sand over Sandy's head with a question mark. He made his 'what the heck is that about?' face.

"I have no idea why the prize is a ham, Sandy," said Jack. "These Vikings are crazy."

"A race is something that would easy for us to help him with," Tooth said, carrying on Jack's line of thinking. "Sandy and I are still at full power, and even you three probably have enough energy left to help in a few small ways."

"And I don't need much oomph to get by anyway," pointed out Jack. "If I can get Hiccup to believe just long enough for me to get him through the race, I can help ice his way to victory. All we have to do is help him cheat and completely sabotage the other kids. It's a perfect plan."

Jack paused.

"Other than the sabotaging the other kids part. That'sâ€|probably not a very Guardian thing to do, but we won't hurt them and they're all going to be cheating furiously themselves â€" I heard one talking about attaching spikes to his sled." All the other Guardians winced. "So it's more like we're just evening the odds a bit. And preventing Hiccup from getting maimed. And he'll believe in us for sure by the end, so that'll keep us afloat to head home. We'll be weak, but still here."

"Sounds like excellent plan!" said North.

"Now," Jack said, his enthusiasm waning just a bit, "I just have to convince Hiccup it is, too."

* * *

><p>As evening fell, Hiccup sat on the wooden walkway on the cliffside and looked out to sea. Gobber had let him off the hook from his work early, probably out of pity. Hiccup could tell his behavior was upsetting the blacksmith and part of him was somewhat grateful that Gobber cared, but that tiny bit of warmth didn't really do much to fight the cold blizzard of emotions that was raging inside him, bitter and painful.<p>

There were dark places that his thoughts did not, and would not, go, if only because he still took small joys in his life, even if he took them in solitude, but right now was the closest they'd ever strayed

to that kind of darkness. His whole future was laid out before him and it was a miserable one. He'd work, he'd live, he'd be a face that no one took notice of, other than to say, "Remember how much trouble that boy used to be?" Maybe he'd find a wife in some other village somewhere that wanted the status of being married to a chief's son, but when his father inevitably chose someone else to replace him as chief instead of Hiccup, she'd probably transform into a shrill harriidan that made him miserable at every turn.

So, probably better to stay single then, Hiccup decided, instead of being unwanted and unloved in his own house. It'd be just him and the sheep. And most likely the rumors that came about when one lived alone _with _sheep, but he figured he could handle those by just not talking to anyone. That was what being a hermit was all about, after all.

Speaking of sheep, Hiccup decided he probably ought to come up with more sheep names and took out the little book and pencil he carried around with him in the pocket in his vest and got back to work on his list.

"Ubbi. Ubbi's a good name for a sheep," he muttered to himself. "Maybe Grai? That's a good name for a really cranky sheepâ€|"

It was right then that he was hit in the side of the head with a snowball.

Wiping the snow off his face and closing his eyes, he started muttering, "You're not real, you're not real, you're not realâ€|"

Nothing else happened for a minute or so, but then Hiccup felt chunks of ice stuffed down the back of his tunic.

"Not real, not real, not realâ€|"

After that, at least for a few minutes, there were no more icy incidents. Hiccup was starting to think it was over â€" at least until he went to turn the page of his notebook, only to find that all the pages had been iced together.

"Jack!" He turned to glare and saw him standing there, a vague, skinny shape, half-blurred. Half-real, half-not.

"I thought I wasn't real?" Jack said, and his voice echoed slightly in Hiccup's ears, sounding somewhat indistinct, as if he was trying to talk from underwater or from a great distance.

"I'm just hallucinating you. Crazy people talk to their hallucinations all the time."

"You're not crazy, Hiccup. Part of you knows that. That's why you can still see and hear me. You can't make up your mind." Jack paused. "I think you don't really _want _to make up your mind."

Hiccup looked out at the ocean again, expression miserable.

"I just want to be left alone," he said.

"No," said Jack, taking a seat beside him, placing his staff next to

him and drawing up his knees to his chin. "I think the problem here is that you don't."

Hiccup shut his eyes again and when he opened them, Jack's form was clearer and less indistinct. But blurrier. Definitely blurrier, at the same time, though for a different reason this time.

"Do you know why I want you to know for sure that I'm real?" asked Jack.

"Because you want to draw me into an inner world comprised entirely of my own delusions?"

"No," said Jack, "because if you believe I'm not real, then that means you'll believe everything I said about you isn't real."

Hiccup looked away and after a moment, he said in a thin, cracking voice, "It isn't. Everything you said isn't -"

"Just because a bunch of very stupid people think you're a liar doesn't mean you are one. It doesn't mean some god swooped in and did all the hard work we did and that everything we did together happened in your head. That makes even less sense than five spirits helping you do it. You believe in gods, right? You believe in frost giants. Then why can't we be real?"

"Because Snotlout was right, there's no one that would â€"

"You're basing thinking we're figments of your imagination on something said by a guy that probably can't count to five. Using his fingers."

"Actually, he can make it to twelve. He gets hung up on the teens."

"My point is that you're basing all this on the bad feelings you have, that you don't deserve friends, because some idiot that bullies you says so. Maybe he's just wrong. Maybe they're all wrong. Maybe you should be basing how you feel about this and what you really believe in on the fact that you're a good kid and despite that, their idea of the holiday spirit is making you feel bad about yourself. Do those sound the actions of a reasonable group of people? Making someone feel bad around the holidays, even when he tries to fix things?"

"Not really," Hiccup admitted.

"You shouldn't care about what they think of you."

"And yet I still do."

Jack shook his head. "Why?"

"Do you care about what the other Guardians think of you?"

"Yeah, but they're good people and they treat me well."

"You were alone for three hundred years, right? Where were they then? During all that time?"

Jack went silent at that, finally saying, "They apologized for that. They've made a real effort to make up for ignoring me. They didn't realize how alone I was."

"My dad has saved my life probably about fifty times since I was a baby. When I was five, he wrestled a Gronckle that got into the house and since he didn't have his axe on hand, he beat it to death with a frying pan when it was trying to carry me off and eat me. After the fight, he held me for a solid couple'a hours and refused to let go. Even while he was doing cleanup and giving orders around the village, he was carrying me the whole time because he didn't want to leave me alone and because I was so shook up over the whole thing."

Hiccup went on, "The other kids, they put out the fires when the dragons attack. I've seen them dodging fireballs before, still trying to save people's houses â€" and sometimes their lives. Astrid jumped through some burning wreckage that none of the adults could get through without collapsing a house to save a little girl still stuck inside. She got her out just in time before the roof caved in."

Hiccup shook his head. "I've seen every single person in this village â€" except for Mildew, of course - do something kind or selfless for me or for each other growing up. They yanked me out of the way of fireballs. They helped take care of me when my mom died and my dad was too out of it to really look after me well. They taught me my letters or taught me a trade or taught me how to sew my own clothes and gave me the nicest wool they had just because I asked nicely. That's why this is so hard."

His eyes were glistening. "Even as much as they hate me, even as much as they almost wish I'd get eaten by a dragon, they'd never actually let it happen, because at heart, they're good people. I can't just write them off as not mattering, because they do matter to me. I don't want to stop caring about what they think of me â€" I want to change what they think of me."

Jack considered this for a little while, before saying, "Then let us help you do that, Hiccup."

"You already tried." He added dryly, "Provided I didn't just imagine it."

"The race. The sled race tomorrow. We can help you win. It's justâ€|something solid for you. Something that will make you a winner for a day, something no one else can take credit for. If they are good people at heart, like you're saying, they'll probably just be like 'oh, good for Hiccup, he did something well.'"

Hiccup sat in silence for a while, pursing his lips as he considered it.

"And if I lose, I'll just get humiliated. Again. As always."

"And if you never try things and stick to yourself, your life is never going to change the way you want it to. You're not going to get a chance to live, and let me tell you something, after three hundred years of living, after almost not having the chance to live past eighteen, one thing I know is that you'll miss out on so much if you give up and just seclude yourself away. You don't deserve to miss

out on life." Jack reached out and took Hiccup's hand in his own. "This is last ditch before we have to go, before it'll hurt us too much to stay here, but let us try to help you one more time. Please."

Hiccup looked at Jack, who was now solid and tangible again where he sat next to him, took in a deep breath, opening his mouth as if to say no, but then shrugged, "I've lost every year since I was five. I guess if I lose one more time, it wouldn't be the end of the world."

Jack smiled at him, squeezing his hand. "Trust me, with our help, there's no chance you're going to lose." He paused. "Provided you're okay with us helping you cheat against the other kids a little."

"Oh no, that's fine," said Hiccup, shaking his head. "We're Vikings. Cheating's actually an officially recognized part of the race. You get extra points for it to use in a tiebreaker if there's a tie. The reason I usually lose is that I'm really bad at it."

"Oookay, well, then you're going to be the kind of horrible, no-good, dishonest cheater that any Viking could be proud of."

* * *

><p>On the day of the race, the Guardians were feeling fairly optimistic. While Jack, Bunny, and North were significantly weaker, Hiccup believed in them again, fully and without limits, and it meant that they at least weren't as close to fading out as they had been when Hiccup was wavering back and forth on the issue.<p>

What helped was that the sled race took place on the same terrain every year, which mean that the Guardians were able to prepare for helping Hiccup with the race.

"Okay, Bunny, do you have all your stuff in place?" Jack asked.

"It's all ready to go, mate," said the rabbit. "Not going to be the easiest, tunneling through this ground since it's frozen, but I already have the tunnels I need for a few bits of it set up."

"Tooth and Sandy, you're going to be responsible for waylaying the kids in that one part of the forest. Plenty of foliage for you to hide in."

"Understood!" chirped Tooth, and Sandy gave a little salute.

"And North, do you have the snowglobe ready?"

"Is all ready to go. Should let Hiccup skip that whole section with the rocks they are having to slide between. Only have one I can use, though. Not enough vim and vigor left to make more and we need one for trip to own time " and another to get home from the land of the fairies if we are thrown back into the fight we left."

"That should be enough for Hiccup to win, especially with me keeping him moving fast. Alright, everyone, into position!"

At that, the Guardians broke up to take their respective places along

the racecourse.

Gathering at the top of the hill " or mountain, really " were the teens and the older Vikings that were supposed to see them off. From the distance, Jack saw that a large Viking with a thin beard that looked a bit like Snotlout (maybe his dad?) was officiating the start of the race.

Hiccup was just a tiny figure next to his sled, which looked nowhere near as intimidating as the sleds of the others, but Jack saw the sense in that. Some of the other kids really had put things like spikes on their sleds, but they were large and heavy because of it. Hiccup's sled was made of a sturdy light wood of some kind, the metal rails thin and sharp. In a race, bigger was not better, and it was clear right from the start that Hiccup had the faster sled.

The problem really was the cheating. First of all, Snotlout went before "Go!" was even shouted, and the older Viking's only response after giving the signal, was "That's my boy! Did you see that? It's five points for cheating at the start!"

And it didn't stop there. As the kids careened down the mountain, they started cutting in front of each other, trying to shove each other into rocks, trying to knock sticks in the way of each other's sleds as they slid. Hiccup just wasn't aggressive enough in the face of the onslaught, dodging each obstacle that was in his way, but refusing to do anything that might hurt anyone else.

"You might as well give up now, Hiccup!" shouted Snotlout, as the two slid neck and neck with each other. "You never win!"

"Yeah, about that, Snotlout," said Hiccup, showing a bit more of a competitive edge now. "See you at the finish line!"

With that, as they approached two trails through an area that was filled with large boulders they had to steer around, he dragged his boot in the snow to veer off into the right-side track when the others all took the left.

"Where is he going?" Snotlout shouted.

"He's taking the hard way!" shouted Ruffnut. "Idiot!"

North was waiting near the rocks. They decided to get Hiccup past the entire rocky area with the snowglobe but no farther than that. This had to be realistic, in the end, and if he ran the whole course supernaturally fast the village might suspect something.

"There you go, my young friend!" North said as Hiccup flew by and he threw the snowglobe ahead of him.

"Thanks, North!" Hiccup called out and then he disappeared into the light with a loud vorp and was spat out farther down the trail.

The other kids eventually got past the boulders, amidst a rough and tumble mess of shoving and flinging snowballs at each other, and saw Hiccup far ahead.

"Hey!" called out Tuffnut. "How'd he get ahead of us?"

"I don't know!" called Astrid. "There's no way he could have navigated that â€" aaagh!"

They'd now reached the part of the course where Bunny had done his work, apparently. The tunnels he'd dug under the snow collapsed under the weight of some of the teens and the bumps and ramps he'd created launched the others in the air.

In the end, it resulted in a complete wipeout, with every one of them crashing into the snow. Fortunately, he'd planned ahead for this and made sure the snow was in soft drifts after the tunnels and bumps to catch them when they crashed. None of them were hurt in the least, just completely bewildered as they sat scattered in the snowbanks they'd landed in.

"Hey, which one of you messed up the track ahead of time!" Snotlout yelled at the others, getting back on his sled.

"Wasn't me!" Tuffnut called out.

"Liar!"

"Come over here and call me that again!"

Seeing Bunny hopping into the nearby woods â€" and then falling over and laughing when he saw that the teens were now squabbling instead of racing - Jack chuckled to himself. Actually, it was much closer to maniacal cackling over how well their plans were working, but he figured that was a bit uncouth for the good guys, so he preferred to think of it as chuckling.

Calling up the wind, he flew off to catch up with Hiccup and help him with the next part of the race.

Whipping down the mountain, he saw the Viking on an open stretch of snow below and zipped down, flying with his back to the ground at the same speed Hiccup's his sled was going, one arm folded behind his head like he was relaxing in the sunshine.

"So, how's it feel to have a giant lead on the others and the knowledge that they all just faceplanted spectacularly in the snow?"

"I don't hate it," Hiccup admitted.

"Okay, the next part is the forest, right?" Jack said, turning around to face ahead.

"Yeah. They'll be taking the other trail where Sandy and Tooth are waiting. Even though it covers less distance, no one in their right mind would take this one. There are parts where the ground drops off into pits and ravines. Too dangerous." Hiccup paused. "So, if you really are a hallucination, now would be the time to tell me so I know I'm not in my right mind."

"You're not crazy," Jack assured him. "Now, hold on to your hat and your Ugg boots, kiddo, this is about to get pretty wild."

"What are Ugg boots? I know some_one named Ugg and these aren't his boots."

With that, they shot into the narrow trails of the forest. Hiccup was right about this track being too perilous, but peril was nothing to a kid when they were being protected by a Guardian. Anytime the trail got too rugged or fell off into a steep embankment, Jack just iced over a straight track in front of the sled, leading Hiccup back on the trail. In fact, he made a game of it, zipping him around trees in circles, tossing in the occasional loop-de-loop. The two of them were laughing so loud and having so much fun that Jack didn't even notice how tired he was getting. He didn't notice how using his power so much was quickly wearing him down. He'd never had believers before and even though Hiccup firmly believed in him, that wasn't enough to sustain a Guardian.

It affected his flight first.

"Hey, whoa! Whoa, what â€"

He had started to drop suddenly, before catching himself again.

"Jack, what's wrong?"

"I dunno. I â€" aaugh!" This time the dropping meant he almost hit a low-lying tree branch. Catching himself just in time, he managed to swoop up over it, but it meant he almost let Hiccup slip down a steep incline. Laying down ice just in the nick of time, he dropped again.

"What's happening to you?" Hiccup called out, worried.

"I think I'm running out of juice here," Jack called out. "I told you, we're not from around here. You're our only believer in this area, it means we've been losing power the whole time we've been here. I think I'm losing the ability to fly."

"Then we should stop," Hiccup called out, starting to drag his foot behind the sled to slow down.

"No! Let me at least get you through the woods," Jack said, struggling to stay airborne and ice Hiccup's way down the trail at the same time. "Then you'll have a clear shot to the finish line."

"If we stop, I can walk the rest of the way out of the woods."

"But you'll lose your lead!"

"If you try to keep this up, you'll lose your friendship with the ground."

"My friendship with the ground?" Jack asked, confused, almost hitting another branch.

"Yeah, it'll stop being a friendship because your relationship with it will get waaay more personal."

Jack couldn't help but laugh, but that laugh quickly faded as he dropped again, flailing as he willed himself to stay in the air just a little longer.

"Jack, stop! We have to stop!" Hiccup cried out, worried now, more concerned for Jack than the race.

"No, you're almost out! You're almost -"

Jack dropped like a stone, and his eyes went wide when he realized what was ahead. Part of the trail was just a log over little frozen stream and Hiccup was going too fast to stop before he hit it. He had a choice in that moment with what to do with the last little bit of energy he had left, and he made it, quickly, thoughtlessly.

With a sweep of his staff, Jack spread a trail of ice over the log that carried Hiccup safely over. From there on out, the trail was snowy and straight, leading right out of the last of the forest. As long as Hiccup kept on going, he'd have a clear path to win the race.

That was all Jack had left in him, though, which was why he did indeed have a relationship with the ground that was suddenly full of much more of a commitment than he was comfortable with. He bounced off a thick branch, crashed right through a cluster of bushes, and started sliding down the frozen stream. Then he skidded off to the side of it and down the embankment it traveled along.

"Aaugh!" The entire surface of the steep slope was just loose snow, rocky scree, and dead leaves, and without the ability to fly, there was no stopping his downward slide. Tumbling over and over, he lost his grip on his staff, which went flying off ahead of him and sliding over the edge of something, Jack noticed with alarm. There was a definite drop off of some kind ahead.

Fortunately, Jack landed on a tangle of branches and saplings that were at the edge of the drop.

Taking a moment to just breathe, Jack lay there panting, afraid to move at first for fear of slipping farther.

"Jack! Are you okay?" called Hiccup's voice far up on the trail and he appeared up above, peering over the edge. Apparently he'd stopped and had ran back up the trail.

"I'm fine! Just a little banged up. Don't stop for me; I just have to climb up. Go and finish!"

"But there's supposed to be more of a ledge there. It looks like it washed away in the last rain. It's not safe for you to be that close to it"

The branches Jack was tangled up in started creaking and then snapped beneath his weight, so that he fell even farther, his fall only stopped by more branches snagging the hood of his sweatshirt, leaving him dangling over the drop, too far out to reach the ledge. Now he could see what Hiccup was talking about. There was a little rockface with a straight fall down and the ground below was flat and solid, covered in snow. He saw his staff resting in it below.

It wasn't that far down, maybe only fifteen or twenty feet, but for someone that wasn't as sturdy as a Guardian, it was the kind of drop that could break a leg or a neck.

Hiccup made his way carefully down the slippery slope, making sure he didn't tumble his way down like Jack did.

"I told you, go on ahead, I'll â€" Jack squirmed slightly but started to slip out of his hoodie so he stopped moving and clamped his arms down. "I'll figure a way out of this."

"Yeeah, I'm not the most comfortable with leaving you dangling over a twenty foot drop," Hiccup said, when he finally got up to the edge. Supporting himself against a large tree that leaned out over the expanse, he tried to reach for the dangling Jack. Jack could see why Hiccup was trying to pull him over. If he could get up where Hiccup was there was a gentler slope that led around the rock face to the ground below that they could climb down without getting hurt.

"Even if I fall, I'll be fine," Jack pointed out. "I'm a lot sturdier than normal people."

"I didn't get to finish what I was saying," said Hiccup, reaching out and trying to snag Jack's shirt without putting any weight on the branches he was dangling from, for fear he'd continue to fall. "Down there, that's â€" "

Despite Hiccup's careful efforts, Jack's weight was just too much for the branches and there was a crack and a snap. Jack saw Hiccup's hand flash out in a last ditch attempt to snag his hoodie, but he missed, and Jack plummeted straight to the ground with a thump, landing painfully on his back.

"Owww, that hurt."

"Jack!"

The ground was just as hard as it had looked, the wet soil frozen solid into a hard, flat surface. The thin dusting of snow on top had done absolutely nothing to soften his fall. Sitting up gingerly, Jack reached around and rubbed his back.

"Jack, are you okay?" Hiccup said, as he made his way down the gentle slope to where Jack was. He stood back near the treeline, looking over at him.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Jack said, standing up and reaching over to snag his staff off the ground.

"Oh, thank the gods," said Hiccup leaning over, hands on his knees, catching his breath. "You had me worried for a second."

"Like I told you," Jack said, walking back over to Hiccup through his outline in the snow. "I'm really sturdy. You didn't need to stop."

"No, not that. I believed you. It's just this is Dead Man's Hole."

Jack stopped where he stood, which incidentally had been the spot where he'd landed.

"Dead Man's Hole?" he asked. The lizard part of his brain suddenly

started screaming out bloody panic, even though the conscious parts of his brain hadn't quite caught enough to understand why it was throwing a fit.

"Yeah, we go swimming here in the summer," Hiccup said. "During, you know, the two whole weeks it's actually warm enough."

That was when Jack's eyes went wide and he looked down at the flat surface he was standing on, cold understanding coming to him like a snowball to the face. For the first time since he'd grown so used to the cold that he didn't even feel it as cold anymore, he felt his blood chill in his veins.

He was standing on ice. He was standing on ice, over water, without the ability to fly or freeze it over properly.

"For a second," Hiccup went on, "I was afraid that the ice was going to -"

There was a sudden, terrifyingly familiar sound that rended the air and under his feet, Jack saw cracks appear in the ice, spreading out in jagged shapes. Water seeped up in lines that soaked the snow. Hiccup stared out at the splintering ice, wide-eyed, his expression of horror a mirror of Jack's own. It looked like Jack was about to get about as uncomfortably intimate with the water as he had with the ground.

"- do _that_," Hiccup finished, practically wilting where he stood. "Yeah, that's pretty much the opposite of good."

4. Chapter 4

****A/N:**** And that's it, folks. No sequel planned so this is likely the last I'll dabble in this little universe.

See if you can spot the homage to a great Christmas special - incidentally one that's got a passage from the Bible, but the joke is more about the Christmas special. Also, I know a lot of you are watching and reading but not reviewing and now that it's over, I'd love to know what you think of it!

* * *

><p>It's the Great Spirit Sleigh, Hiccup Haddock

by Saph

* * *

><p>Chapter 4: It's a Wonderful Life

Hiccup had never had a friend before, which meant he'd never had a friend in danger before, which in turn meant he'd never felt such overpowering terror for a friend's well-being before. He didn't like it and therefore decided he needed to rectify the situation as quickly as possible, preferably before Jack went into an incoherent panic.

"How - how deep is it?" Jack asked.

"Uuuuh, it kinda goes down to where the underground water is. The reason it's called Dead Man's Hole is because so many Vikings have drowned here because they didn't realize how deep it was, so that their bodies were found floating later in a gruesome -"

"Hiccup," Jack said sharply, his voice sounding like it had been shoved through the auditory equivalent of a cheese grater. "Can you can the Viking dramatic thing for now? Not the time."

"Sorry, force of habit," apologized Hiccup. "Can you swim?"

"No. I can fly and freeze water. I never needed to learn."

"Do you need to breathe?"

"Yeah. Like I told you, I'm not really your typical spirit."

"And you don't think you can fly at all?"

Jack flailed his arms a little and it did nothing at all to change his position in relation to the ice. "I'm tapped."

The ice creaked again, ominously and Jack closed his eyes tight, clutching his staff in a white knuckled grip.

"I can't - I can't do this again." Jack's voice was high and frightened and his words came out in huffed breaths. "I can't do this again. I can't."

Hiccup couldn't even imagine the fear he was feeling. Coming close to death was scary enough, but to die, to actually die, cold and alone and suffocated by the dark, it had to have been terrifying. There had to have been a moment when he thought 'this is it,' where he'd realized all he was going to miss out on. There had to have been a moment where he felt his life starting to slip away and then there'd only been the black.

To face the prospect of that againâ€¦

Hiccup moved to take a cautious step out onto the ice to get closer but Jack opened his eyes right then, and even though they were glistening with unshed, he held up his hand.

"Don't you dare! Stay on the bank!"

"But - "

"I'm a Guardian, Hiccup. I'm supposed to protect you, not the other way around. If you try to come out here, I swear I'll jump to break it on purpose."

"That's not fair!" Hiccup insisted, staying at the bank.

"What's not fair is a kid risking his life for somebody who's already lived more than three hundred years. You have your whole life ahead of you - I've already lived plenty of mine."

The ice groaned again and the jagged cracks started spreading out farther. Jack's hitched breaths increased in frequency. He was close

to hyperventilating now and very nearly crying, though he was making an admirable attempt to reign in his fear.

There had to be a way out of this, Hiccup thought, casting about for ideas. He had no rope, there were no vines this time of year to toss out to pull him in if he fell in. The other kids weren't nearby and even if they had been, convincing them to believe in Jack quickly enough to help him fly would have been impossible, given their attitudes. They needed help, they needed -

"Tooth!" Hiccup suddenly yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Tooth! Sandy! Help! Jack needs help!"

Picking up on that line of thought, Jack started yelling, too. "North! Bunny!"

"Tooth! Sandy!"

If one of the others heard them, even if they weren't one of the fliers, they could get the fliers. Even though they yelled for several minutes, there was no answer, though. They were too far off. Even if Bunny heard them with his sensitive ears, it'd take him time to hippity hop over to them at his current size.

Jack tried to take a light, ginger step forward, but cracks radiated out from where he placed his foot, so he stopped, freezing in place. All of a sudden he started to seem calmer, but it wasn't actual calm, maybe something more like resignation.

"If you run, you might be able to get one of them in time," Jack said, in a tone of voice that was very hollow.

"No I won't," Hiccup said, looking at how sorry a state the ice was in. Gesturing at it, he said, "Look at it!"

"Then if you run, at least - at least you won't be here to see," said Jack, voice hitched. He looked haunted by the idea, as if he'd rather be alone if he happened, and then it occurred to Hiccup that if he'd died saving his sister's life that his sister must have been there when he drowned. The thought that he'd rather die alone than someone be traumatized by seeing his death made Hiccup's throat constrict.

Jack was even trying to _die _unselfishly.

As Hiccup looked into glistening blue eyes, so very human and full of fear, he was struck by just how human they were. Jack was a spirit, but he was also a boy just like Hiccup, and the thought of leaving him alone was unbearable.

"I'm not leaving you."

Jack smiled a bright smile through his tears. It was forced because he was scared but at the same time, it wasn't, because it was a smile at Hiccup, for him, to show that he cared.

"You have a race to win," Jack said. "You need to go and â€" and fix things for yourself. Because this â€" this is happening either way, and I'd rather know that you're going to get what you need to be happy."

"I'm not leaving you," Hiccup insisted, in a tone of voice that made it clear that there was no force on the planet that could move him.

The Viking looked down at the ice, lips pressing together in deep thought. Then he saw how the cracks radiated out from Jack's feet, his brows furrowed, and he looked up at Jack with sudden realization.

"Jack, look at me. I know you're scared, but you told me that I was good at seeing things a different way, right? Right now, I see a way out of this. Do you trust me?"

Jack nodded a fragile little nod.

"Lay down on the ice on your stomach."

"But all my weight will be -"

"All your weight's already on the ice, but it's concentrated on your feet. You need to spread it out."

Jack nodded and carefully, very carefully, lowered himself down on the ice, trying not to cringe at the creaking noises of protest it made as he did it. Now on his stomach, he looked to Hiccup.

"Now shimmy like you've never shimmied before. Try to keep as much of your body spread out as possible so there aren't any particular points of it pressing down."

Jack nodded shakily and started to do as Hiccup said, sliding himself along the ice away from the weak spot, towards the bank. It seemed to be working. He was starting to get away from where the ice was cracked and more towards where it was solid. Unfortunately, when he dug a toe into the ice to help propel himself along, it was finally too much.

There was a loud crack, his eyes went wide, and then the ice collapsed under him.

Hiccup had never felt himself move as fast as he did when he dove forward, sliding along the ice and grabbing Jack's staff. Even as he went under, Jack was still holding it and when he noticed tension on the other end, he used it to pull his head above water. For a moment, Hiccup was terrified the ice would crack under him, too, but it didn't even creak.

For the very first time in his thirteen years of life, being a hiccup had paid off. Jack was just a wisp of a thing but Hiccup was even lighter and it was like the ice wasn't even registering the extra weight.

"I've got you - Jack! Jack, calm down!"

His flailing movements were just breaking the ice up more and making him slip in again.

Deciding that yelling wasn't helping, he said quietly, "Jack, it's okay. It's okay. I promise you, I'm gonna get you out of this. Calm

down. It's okay."

It was the kind of soothing voice that one might use on a wild animal, but miraculously, it did the trick. Hiccup felt almost as if he was some kind of animal trainer, taming his friend's wild fear.

"It's okay. Just hold on, pull your head up, and calm down."

Jack did just that, spitting out water and pulling his head above the surface farther above the surface. Hiccup kept the staff pinned down with his body weight to give Jack some leverage.

"The worst thing people have to worry about this is freezing to death. Not a problem with you."

"But I can't â€" I can't â€" " Jack sputtered.

"Here's what we're gonna do. You need to climb up the staff and onto the ice again like before, on your stomach. This side looks sturdier, so do it here."

"What if it breaks?"

"If the ice breaks, then I'll just keep sliding back and either we'll reach ice that can support your weight or you'll break through it until you reach shore. See? We have a plan. That's more than we had a few minutes ago, right? You just have to stay calm."

Jack nodded and started to use the staff to pull himself onto the ice. More of it cracked and snapped beneath him, sending him back into the water and into a panic, but he managed to keep it under control, using the staff to keep his head above the water.

Hiccup did exactly as promised, sliding further back on the ice towards the shore, keeping the staff in Jack's grip but moving him towards more solid ice.

With Hiccup digging the toes of his boots into the ice to keep the staff steady, Jack was able to heave himself up onto the ice by kicking the water furiously. It cracked underneath him, but held, and the two of them kept sliding back carefully, Hiccup holding onto one end of the staff and Jack onto the other, just in case the ice cracked under him again. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Hiccup's boot met the solid dirt of the shore.

Sitting back on his rump and giving the staff one last tug, he pulled the exhausted Jack bodily onto the shore with him, where Jack immediately curled up in a ball in the snow and basically had a meltdown, sobbing silently, shoulders shaking, trying to suppress his crying out of what looked like embarrassment.

"It's okay. Jack, it's okay," said Hiccup and he pulled his friend into his arms. "It's okay. You're okay."

Jack's breath came in ragged gasps at Hiccup's ear as the Viking held him, ignoring how blisteringly cold he was after taking his dip in the water.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid," Hiccup said quietly. "It's

not really the Viking way, letting it all out but it probably should be, so you don't have to hold it in."

Jack started crying openly now and Hiccup rubbed his hand comfortingly along the wet fabric at his back, even taking a moment to push his wet hair out of his eyes. Finally, Jack took several shuddering, gasping breaths and managed to start the process of calming himself down.

"Thank you. Thankyouthankyouthankyou," he gasped out. "You shouldn't have put yourself in danger like that, though."

"Well, you know, I'm a Viking. Danger's kind of â€" um â€" " Hiccup searched for the right words and then stumbled on ones he was fairly sure he'd heard his father say once or twice: "It's an occupational hazard."

Jack laughed, seeming amused at how blithe Hiccup was being over the whole thing, as if saving someone's life was all in a day's work.

"And here you said you weren't the type to save somebody," Jack pointed out, apparently remembering what Hiccup had said when they'd been talking about Jack saving his sister.

"I guess maybe I didn't know myself as well as I thought."

Jack smiled at Hiccup and Hiccup smiled back warmly.

Right then, they heard the caterwauling cries of the other teens on the race course in the distance. Both their eyes went wide.

"The race!" Jack said, standing, grabbing his staff with one hand and dragging Hiccup to his feet with the other. "You have to get back in the race!"

"But what about â€" "

"I'll be fine! I'm not hurt. How do we get out of here without falling down any more holes?" Jack asked.

"This way." Hiccup led the way around Dead Man's Hole and up a little slope to the trail they'd been on.

The two boys ran to the edge of the forest, where Hiccup's sled still lay on the path. In one swooping movement, Hiccup darted in and picked it up, running out of the woods to look over in the distance. The other teens were just getting out of the other copse of trees their trail went through and they looked like Sandy and Tooth had given them hell in the forest. Leaves and sticks were sticking out of their hair.

"The trees are alive!" Snotlout was screaming. "The trees are aliiiiive!"

"You still have a chance!" Jack cried. "Go!"

Hiccup held his sled in front of him and raced forward to give himself a running start, then dove forward onto it. He suddenly felt Jack's hands on his boots, pushing him along even faster to give him

a better start and then there was a flump behind him and he looked back over his shoulder to see that Jack had collapsed belly first in the snow after the sled started to go too fast for him to keep up.

Then his eyes were fixed on the finish line in the distance. For once, he was going to win something, and strangely, he didn't want to do it for himself. Right now, he wanted to do it because his friend " the very first person he could ever call a friend " had just nearly died trying to help him and he didn't want Jack's efforts to be in vain.

The Viking teens all careened towards the finish line, converging on the final track of the race.

"Hey, where'd you even come from?!" Snotlout shouted when Hiccup joined them.

"Sorry Snotlout, I can't hear you over the sound of me taking the lead."

With his sleeker, faster sled, that was indeed what was happening.

What he didn't see was Snotlout glowering behind him and picking up a large rock as he swept by it in the snow. He definitely didn't see Snotlout throw it, which meant that when it landed in his path, he didn't veer out of the way in time. One of the sled's runners hit the rock and he was going so fast that that half of his sled launched into the air, sending him tumbling over and over in the snow. He only just managed to avoid slamming into a boulder jutting out of the snow, but his sled wasn't so lucky. It smashed right into it. Hiccup climbed out of the snow to examine his sled, only to find that one of the runners was now bent and mangled, and the wood was cracked. There was no way it'd make it to the finish line " and it didn't matter, because in the time it took Hiccup to recover, the other teens had all already crossed it.

"And it's an unprecedented five-way tie!" Gobber called out in the distance. "The judges are now tabulatin' the points from any instances of cheating seen by the bystanders."

Hiccup walked ahead, dragged his busted sleigh with him, only to see Snotlout pointing up the trail towards him.

"You saw how I made Hiccup wipe out, right?" he called to the judges. "I should totally get points for that."

* * *

><p>Hidden by the forest, beyond the treeline, the Guardians gathered.<p>

"Jack, what happened to you?" asked Tooth, concerned. "Why are you all wet?"

"It's a long story," Jack said, looking out of the woods at the lonely figure standing there examining his broken down sleigh.

"He did not win?" North asked, looking out at the crowd.

"I ran out of juice and he wouldn't leave me. It held him up and he lost his lead," said Jack, leaving out the whole truth so the others wouldn't be worried. He curled up his hand and pressed his knuckles against his mouth as if he was only just resisting biting them. It was with great resignation that he said, "We need to go."

"Why?" asked Bunny.

"He's not going to believe in us after this," Jack said in a hollow voice.

"How can you be sure?" asked North.

"Because with how many times I let him down, I wouldn't believe in me, either," Jack sighed miserably, and with that, he turned to walk back in the direction of the sleigh. After casting sad looks at the lone boy, cast apart, the others all turned and did the same, quietly lamenting their failure.

* * *

><p>Tuffnut, Ruffnut, Astrid, Snotlout, and Fishlegs were fighting. This was nothing new, but in terms of viciousness, this was pretty much the worst Hiccup had ever seen it, partly because the entire village had gotten involved.<p>

"I'm telling you," said Mulch, "we've tabulated the results five times now and it's still a five-way tie."

"The Ham is mine!" called out Ruffnut.

"No, it's mine!" yelled Snotlout.

"You're all wrong, I was the one that cheated the most," bragged Astrid, elbowing Snotlout in the face.

"My boy is clearly the winner!" Spitelout was arguing with Fishlegs' mother.

"He most certainly is not!"

This was the problem with Vikings sometimes, Hiccup reflected. They got a little crazy about their competitions _and_ their cured meats.

For once, his father couldn't seem to get a handle on the situation, if only because so many parties were involved. Everyone from the teens, to their parents, to people concerned about upholding the fine tradition of unfair competition wanted to get a word in edgewise. For once, his father was overwhelmed.

"Hey!"

Hiccup surprised himself when the word came out of his mouth, but it didn't seem to surprise everyone else. They hadn't even heard him.

Hiccup jumped up on the makeshift table that had been set up for lunch for those waiting for the race to end, grabbed a metal spoon

and clanged it against a metal pot that had once been full of stew. He did as loudly as possible, repeatedly, until everyone had stopped fighting to pay attention.

"What are you all doing?" he asked them, looking around at the familiar faces he'd grown up with all his life. Instead of looking at him with disappointment for once, they were looking at him with surprise.

"In case everyone's forgotten, it's still Snoggletog. Has everyone here forgotten what Snoggletog is all about?"

"Winning?" suggested Snotlout.

"No," said Hiccup, taking a step up onto the table to look out at them all. "Let me tell you what Snoggletog is all about. Your attention, please."

He drew in a deep breath and recited: "'And there were in the same country Vikings abiding in the field, keeping watch over their herd of yaks by night. And, lo, a dragon came upon them, and the flames of its maw shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And their leader Horth the Haggard said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all Vikings, for unto you on this day, there is a blacksmith who will bring you sharper weapons with which to slay thine enemies. And this shall be a sign unto you that Ye shall find great axes and broadswords and maces, with which to drench the fields with your enemies' blood. And suddenly there was with Horth a multitude of the Vikingly host praising the gods, and saying, Glory to the gods in the highest, and on earth death towards thine enemies most foul. And saying these prayers, rivers of gore poured forth and every dragon was slain and many were even dismembered and made into hats, and the Vikings did gather around one another in warmth and companionship for a great feast in celebration, to stave off the cold night and give thanks that they all did live for one winter more.'"

Hiccup paused to look out at them all. To his surprise, some of them were sniffing. Gobber was even wiping a tear from his eye.

"So there you have it. That's the true meaning of Snoggletog." Hiccup shook his head. "We shouldn't be fighting. We should be coming together and - and celebrating surviving yet another cold winter together when the dragons â€" and the elements â€" have tried their hardest to make sure we don't. Here, someone hand me a knife."

Stoick stepped forward and handed Hiccup a small metal knife of a good make. Very solid, very nice heft for someone with such a small grip. It was like it was almost made for him.

"Thanks â€" oh hey, this is a nice knife." Deciding to forgo the distraction, though, he stepped forward towards the Winner's Ham and started to cut it up.

"Hey, hey, that's my ham!" Snotlout protested.

"You're right, it is," Hiccup said, tossing him a piece. Then he cut another one and tossed it to Astrid, who was looking at him with wide eyes.

"And it's Astrid's too."

He cut the rest of the pieces up and handed them to Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Fishlegs.

"It's everyone's ham. Think of it as part of the Snoggletog spirit. We share everything else in the village, so you can share a victory. It's something you can all give to each other."

The teens all reflected on that and looked at their ham chunks which were remarkably even in size (Hiccup had done that on purpose to keep them from fighting about it).

"Sounds good to me," said Astrid with a shrug.

"Yeah, I guess that's okay," said Snotlout, his face breaking into a beaming grin. "If it means I get to share with Astrid."

Astrid punched him over that, but only once this time.

Fishlegs was already eating his chunk of ham and the twins were busy squabbling over each other's chunks of ham, but they didn't bother trying to go for the other teens' chunks, at least.

"See, everyone's a winner," said Hiccup.

"Except for you," Snotlout put in.

Hiccup let out a long-suffering sigh. "Except for me."

With that, the group started to break up, pack up, and go back to the village, the teens crowing about their victory and how spectacularly victorious each of them were. To Hiccup's surprise, he got a few smiles and pats on the back by various Vikings, and a few saying things like, "Well done, lad, we thought they were going to fight all day."

But that was all he got. The crowd still parted ways with him, leaving him on the outside as always. His moment in the sun was just that — a moment.

His father was the last straggler. Hiccup cleaned off the knife on his tunic, walked over, and handed it back to him, handle first.

"Here, dad. Thanks for letting me borrow it."

Stoick shook his head. "It's, ah. It's yours. I got it for you for Snoggletog."

Hiccup perked up. "Really?"

"Originally, I was going to give it to whoever won the sled race instead of you as punishment for what you did to the tree —"

Hiccup deflated. "Oh."

"But you've been kicking yourself enough and in the end, no harm was done. So it's yours. You should have a proper Viking weapon anyway,

at your age. Even if it's, ah, a small one."

Even despite the circumstances around it, his father had still thought of the gesture well ahead of the holidays, so Hiccup was touched. He smiled at his father and tucked it into his belt proudly.

"Thanks, dad."

"Yer welcome. By the way, what you did just now, with that little speech -" There was a pause and then Stoick didn't smile at him, but he did pat him awkwardly on the shoulder, hard enough to nearly knock him over. "You did good, son. That would've been a nightmare to deal with otherwise."

With that, he turned to go, sauntering along after the others.

It wasn't exactly what Hiccup was hoping for, but maybe this hadn't turned out that awful, after all.

"So, I was wondering," came a voice at the tree-line and he turned to see that Astrid had doubled back. "How exactly did you get through the right side of the pass? And Widow's Forest?"

"Uuuh. Practice?"

"That's funny, because I've been practicing for the race and I've never seen you here practicing, too," said said, stepping away from the tree she was leaning on and walking towards him with a gleam in here eye that was almost predatory.

"Does it really matter?" said Hiccup. "I still lost."

"You did," she said, looking down at her chunk of ham. "Yet you still gave that speech anyway and tried to get everyone to stop fighting."

"Well, you know, it looked like a vein was about to pop in my dad's head."

"So it was just for your dad, huh?"

Hiccup just shrugged, and Astrid took something small and shiny out of the pouch on her belt: one of the ornaments from the tree.

"Did you make these just for your dad, too? Or were they for all of us?" she asked.

"I â€" I didn't make those," Hiccup lied. "You heardâ€"everyone."

"If all of that was made by Odin, there wouldn't have been tool marks on some of it. You're the only one in the village that could have made these, Hiccup. And it had to have taken a lot of work to do it."

At that, Hiccup just looked at the snow, not sure what to say.

"I know somebody else had to have helped you. There's no way you could have done it all on your own â€" and that thing about spirits

was stupid. You should have just said whoever helped wanted to stay anonymous." She went on, "But between this and that speech...I think I was maybe wrong about you being selfish."

With that, she placed her chunk of ham into his hand.

"I guess you're not _entirely_ awful."

"From you," said Hiccup, astonished, "I'm going to take that as a glowing endorsement."

Astrid tossed the ornament up in the air, then caught it again, before putting it away in her little pouch.

Punching him on the shoulder â€" in a way that was more friendly than painful - Astrid sauntered away, hips swaying confidently in a way that should have been criminal as far as Hiccup was concerned.

As soon as she was out of sight, Hiccup did a little dance in place, hissing, "Yesss."

She'd talked to him! She'd actually talked to him in a way that wasn't full of loathing! She gave him her piece of the Winner's Ham!

He turned to look in the woods for where the Guardians were supposed to meet up with him after the race...only to find that they weren't there. Why weren't they...?

"Oh no," Hiccup muttered to himself, figuring out what might have happened. "Jack, sometimes you're an _idiot_."

* * *

><p>As Bunny dug up the piece of the moon and Sandy and Tooth rigged up the reindeer to the sleigh, Jack sat in the snow, staring blankly at the tree line.<p>

North came over and gingerly sat on the stump next to him.

"You are so sure he will stop believing?"

"We've got minutes, maybe."

"Perhaps then, you should have waited? Talked to him after race?"

Jack was silent.

"You are afraid to face him then. Afraid of what he will say."

Jack drew his knees up to his chin.

"I let him down," he said. "I let him down and we're going to leave and nothing will be able to help him. We're going to leave him like this, stuck being alone."

"That is presuming much," said North. "And now that I think about it, there is one thing you may be missing."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"That Hiccup is very strong boy. He is very kind boy. And he is boy who I have heard stories about. In stories, the children who are strong and brave and kind, they always find their happy ending. Maybe he is not needing to be helped by us. Maybe, whatever happens, he will be able to help himself."

Jack looked up at North, mulling all that over.

"We still have to leave now, in case he stops believing."

"If we leave now, you will not be able to say goodbye."

"If we don't leave now, we might fizzle out of existence."

"Hmm," North said thoughtfully. "You expect him to believe in you...but you don't believe in him."

"Hey, that's not -"

"Is true."

Jack was silent again.

"Or maybeâ€|maybe it is just you do not want to have to say goodbye. Maybe is mix of both." North shrugged. "Who knows? But in any case, I am thinking we should leave when you think we should leave, Jack. You know him best."

Jack looked up at North in alarm, mulling it over.

"That's a tough call there," he said.

"We are Guardians. Making tough calls is, how you say, 'occupational hazard.'"

For a moment, surprise flashed on Jack's face at the wording, but he could tell it was just a happy accident, a coincidence that just happened to mean something.

And it did mean something. Danger, for a Guardian, was an occupational hazard, and he had a choice to make.

* * *

><p>They weren't in the cabin. That meant they were at the sleigh or maybe even gone already.<p>

If they'd left without saying goodbye, he was going to be so angry. He wasn't an angry type of person, which was partly why he butted heads with other Vikings (or more why he didn't butt heads with other Vikings) but that would make him mad, and sad, if they left without saying goodbye.

If Jack left without saying goodbye.

But they'd had a huge head start and the only way they would still be there was if they chose to wait in the clearing, if they were just standing aroundâ€|

Waiting for him. They were waiting for him. As he hopped through the bushes, he saw that they were still gathered around the sleigh.

"Way to give me a heart attack here," Hiccup complained, throwing his hands in the air and gesturing wildly with a chunk of ham clenched in his fist. "I thought you left completely! You were supposed to wait in the trees."

"Sorry," Jack said. "It's just I thought â€"

"You thought I'd stop believing in you, prob'ly. 'Cause you're an idiot â€" here, does anyone want this ham? I'm not a big pork person."

Sandy looked at it consideringly and then shrugged and held out his hand. Hiccup handed it to him and wiped his hand on his tunic, and Sandy immediately started munching on it.

"I will not deny the idiot thing," said Jack, getting up from where he was sitting in the snow and leaning against his staff. "I'm so sorry, Hiccup."

"For almost running off without saying goodbye?"

"For everything. For giving you false hope. For setting you up for even more teasing. Just...for everything. We failed you."

"Nooo, you didn't," Hiccup said with a slight flail. "Even aside from the fact that I was put in a position to do something nice for the village by getting them to stop arguing, and my dad patted me on the back and said I did a good job and gave me this pretty cool knife - and Astrid believed me about at least some of the decorations and said I wasn't awful...even aside from all that, you didn't fail me. If none of that had even happened, you wouldn't have failed me."

"But we couldn't â€"

"You couldn't have fixed this in a day, spirits or not. Or a week. Or even a year. Trust me, I've been trying for pretty much most of my life. You're spirits but you're also only human." He looked at Bunny and Tooth. "Sort of."

"But â€"

"I didn't ask for a miracle. I asked for a _sign_. I asked for a sign that my life could change. I asked for a sign that I could be accepted by the village someday â€" and that there was a chance maybe, just maybe, someday I wouldn't be as lonely, that maybe I could have friends."

There were tears in his eyes now, as he looked specifically at Jack. "And Odin sent _you_."

Jack was speechless.

"Even if you can't stay," Hiccup went on, "Now I know I'm not so awful that I don't deserve friends. Even if I can't find them here in Berk, it's a big world out there, right?"

Jack stepped forward. "Of course you deserve friends. You've always deserved friends, Hiccup."

Tooth beat Jack to the punch on the hugging, zipping in with a cheerful laugh of delight and pulling Hiccup gently into her arms.

"I have happy memories now, you know."

"I'm so glad," she said, beaming at him, briefly hugging him again before letting go. She adjusted his crooked hat on impulse, one last time. "You deserve all the happy memories in the world."

"And I have hope, too," said Hiccup, kneeling down to scritch Bunny behind the ear.

The rabbit didn't protest a bit, thumping his foot, and then beaming up at Hiccup happily when he stopped scritchng.

"Glad to be of service, mate."

Smiling broadly, Sandy made several images appear, rapid-fire, over his head, but Hiccup couldn't follow.

"What's he saying?" he asked North.

"He is saying that he gives you dreams for a reason, Hiccup," said North, and Sandy nodded in agreement, smiling at the Viking.

"And that he is thinking - as we all think - that you have the brightest of futures ahead of you." North got up from his tree stump, hand against his aching back. "And of course you do! Such wonder always in your eyes! My magic sack kicked out something for you before it went kaput. Here."

North reached inside his coat and pulled out a book. Hiccup took it eagerly in his hands.

"'Brakker's Guide to Physical Forces,'" he said, reading the runes on the front, and then flipping through. His eyes went wide as he saw diagrams outlining facts and calculations about centripetal forces and the like. "Hey, thanks!"

North grabbed Hiccup and squeezed him tight. Even though the old man was weaker than usual, it was a little too tight. "Aim high, my young friend. Always aim high!"

North released him and stepped aside and that left him face to face with Jack, still damp from his dip in the pond.

Jack reached into the pocket of his hoodie and took out a piece of paper. He said haltingly, "I saved all your stuff. Your papers and all."

"I thought it was a little abnormally windy the other day."

"Yeah, well...I knew you might regret it later," said Jack, shrugging awkwardly. "The others are in that crate in the cabin, but this one...this one I wanted to show you. It's the picture you drew of us."

I wantedâ€¦I wanted to add you in, like you're part of the group. But...I thought we were leaving and you drew it, so I wanted to..."

He'd wanted to keep it, which was why he'd picked it up on the way to the sleigh, to take home with him, since now he didn't think he'd have a chance to show Hiccup. He'd wanted something drawn by Hiccup's hand. He handed the picture over to Hiccup, who had to bite back a laugh when he saw it.

Alongside the immaculately drawn Guardians was Jack's rendition of Hiccup. It was very badly-drawn, barely more than a stick figure, and he was snub-nosed and wearing a horned helmet. Hiccup supposed that was so that it was clear he was a Viking.

"Frost on windows aside, I'm nooot really much of an artist," Jack admitted.

"No no," Hiccup said, tilting his head to look at it. He said generously, "I think it, ah...captures my _essence_."

Rolling it up, he tucked it inside one of the inner pockets of his vest, close to his heart.

"I also...I also wanted to give you this," Jack said, taking something else out of his pocket and putting it in Hiccup's hand, closing his fingers around it.

It was the little, painted wooden doll, the one that was supposed to be Jack's center.

Behind Jack, Hiccup saw North smiling. He looked down at the figure in his hand then back up at Jack. "I can't take this. It's â€" I can tell it's something important to you."

"It is," Jack said, "but that's all the more reason I want you to have it. It represents me, so it'll be like I'm always here with you. And it also represents something important...and I want you to look at it and remember that, too. I want you to remember everything I said about your center â€" although after that business with the ice, I think you might want to broaden all that stuff about who you are to include the _courage_ that's there, too."

Hiccup looked down at the little figure with eyes that were welling up with tears. Then he looked up at Jack, slightly panicked.

"I don't have anything to give to you â€" wait." He'd thought of something. "Yes I do."

With that, he took off his silly green hat and put it on Jack's head.

"It's getting too small for my big head anyway," said Hiccup.

"Hand-me-downs," Jack joked. "I love me some hand-me-downs."

Hiccup shoved him just slightly, but then that shove turned into something else as he threw his arms around him, pulling him in close. Jack practically tossed his staff to the ground to return the hug

with both arms. Then they were both crying, not caring about how it looked to anyone because the other was crying, too.

"I'll always be here, Hiccup. Maybe not in the way we both would like, but I'll be here."

"I know. I'm â€" I'm never going to forget you," Hiccup said slowly. "I think - I think sometimes the Norns mean for something to happen but there are problems and it can't. I think you were supposed to be my best friend. I think maybe it was just too important for you to live somewhere else, at another time, maybe so you could be a Guardian."

"You might be right. I feel like â€" it's not even like I've known you forever. It's more like it's always felt like I was supposed to know you for forever."

Jack pulled away just enough to look Hiccup in the eyes. "But just because it didn't happen with us, that doesn't mean you're never going to find a best friend. Hiccup, I promise you, someday you're going to have someone just...fall into your life, and when they do you just have to reach out. That's what I did. I had to let go of the fear and distrust and â€" and that's how these guys came into the picture," the frost spirit said, jerking his head in the direction of the others. "And when you find them, when you find that person, you're going to have so much _fun_ together."

With that, Jack pulled Hiccup in for one last hug and then pulled away, reaching up to brush away his tears with his thumb, entirely neglecting his own. Finally, he let go, to snatch his staff up off the ground and join the others as they climbed onto the sleigh. It rumbled and came to life, wings stretching out, engine sputtering. An astonished Hiccup looked on as the reindeer started running, and then flying, and it took to the air.

"Goodbye!" called out Hiccup, and his eyes looked upward. "Just, uh, make you don't run into any dragons on the way up there, okay? It'd be a pretty short trip if you did."

The sleigh started to fly away and Hiccup ran after it, following it through the woods all the way to the cliff-side, where he stood, waving as it flew off into the distance. Despite the risk from not being able to fly, Jack hopped over the edge and stood on the back runner, so that he could get one last look at the young Viking as they went.

Blue eyes locked with green and Hiccup stopped mid-wave to share in one last smile, before Jack became too small to see.

* * *

><p>Jack watched as the tiny figure at the cliff-side disappeared into the difference and then jumped back into the sleigh. It was a bit of a shaky ride, given that North had barely any power left.<p>

As North combined the moon stone with the snowglobe, it beamed out a tremendously bright light, but Jack was barely paying attention, instead looking back at the rocky island receding into the distance. North noticed and gave him a gentle smile.

"Have no fear, Jack. I told you, I know his story."

"Is it a good one?" Jack asked as he looked out into the distance.

"Is a great one! Is the kind of story that teaches one very important thing."

"What's that?" Jack asked, looking at North.

"That you don't have to become what we are to become
legend."

North smiled even wider, a twinkle in his eyes, and even despite his melancholy Jack could do nothing less than smile back.

"Now hang on everyone!" said North, shaking the snowglobe in his hand. "Manny said we must get sleigh to eighty-eight miles per hour and then throw globe. Then we will be back in our own time, probably in middle of fight with fairies."

"Why eighty-eight miles per hour?" asked Bunny, huddling next to Tooth.

"Yeah, that seems kind of arbitrary," Jack put in.

"No idea. Is just what Manny said." North shrugged. "Seems slow. Anyway, get ready for fighting!"

At that, the Guardians all stood ready in the sleigh, grins on their faces and they prepared to do what they did best.

"And awaaaay we gooo!"

North threw the globe in front of them, there was a flash of light, and the Guardians leapt forward into the future that awaited them.

* * *

><p>Back at the cliff-side, Hiccup saw the light flash in the distance and he turned to walk away, back into the woods.<p>

Far be it from feeling empty with them gone, his life felt fuller for having had them in it. Despite his sadness, Hiccup simply wiped the tears from his eye. Putting the little wooden doll in the pocket close to his heart, he headed back to Mildew's old cabin, his new book clutched in hand.

So maybe he hadn't gotten some kind of magical happy ending, but that wasn't how life worked. You had to work hard for happy endings. You had to change things for yourself, change your world around you. Hiccup still wasn't sure how to do that, but what he knew now was that he just had to keep trying until something stuck.

He wasn't some kind of terrible, awful person. He just had to figure out the right way to show the village that.

All his papers were in the crate just as Jack had said and Hiccup looked through them, accepting them all back as part of himself,

eccentric as some of them were. With renewed purpose, he picked up one particular sheet of drawings and looked at them closely. Then he flipped through his new book to some of the diagrams with one hand.

"Looks like I might be able to finally work out the kinks in this one," he said to himself, as he held up his plans for his bola-thrower.

"Aim high, right?" That was what North had said. Hiccup raised both his eyebrows and shrugged to himself. "Can't aim any higher than a Night Fury..."

* * *

><p>The battle was won. The children were safely returned home. The fairies had been properly threatened and smacked into giving up on their kidnapping spree. After it was all said and done, the Guardians returned to the North Pole, victorious.<p>

The mood was largely celebratory, but Jack found himself having trouble celebrating. There was an edge of melancholy inside him that didn't seem to want to go away anytime soon.

The others noticed.

Tooth gently wrapped her arms around him and pulled him in close, without a word. Initially surprised, Jack leaned into her touch, resting his forehead against hers.

"I need to go back and make sure that Baby Tooth handled everything okay while I was gone, but you can come by the Tooth Palace later," she offered. "If you need to talk. Or...or if you just need to spend time with someone."

"I, uh..." Jack swallowed thickly. "I might take you up on that."

With that, she smiled a sad smile at him and pulled away to head back to her duties. The others were just as kind, Bunny patting Jack on the shoulder comfortingly, and Sandy giving him a smile and asking with his pictograms if Jack would be alright.

"I'll be fine, Sandy. I just...I just feel like he's worth being a little sad over," Jack said. Sandy nodded in understanding and briefly took Jack's hand in his own, squeezing it and letting go.

That left Jack and North alone in the main hall of his workshop.

"Jack," said North softly. "Come with me. I want you to see something."

Jack followed, walking along, distracted.

"You are sad about him."

"He's...he's gone. In this time. He's been gone for...for longer than I've even been alive. An hour ago, he was alive and I was talking to

him, and now he's...now he's dead. Just like that. And I'm never going to see him again."

"Ah, but time is time. Every moment happening at once," said North. "This is how some of us hedge the rules a bit, traveling as fast as we do to do our jobs. Time is, how you say...relative."

They got into a little elevator.

"I guess it's less sad when you look at it that way."

"That way is not sad at all. But there is something else I will show you, something that may give you comfort."

The elevator stopped on a level of the workshop Jack had never seen before, despite all his poking around, and they got off, walked through a massive set of dark, wooden doors, and found themselves in...

"You have a library." Jack's eyes went wide. "You have a really, really big library."

He had never seen that many books before, all lined up over countless shelves, winding their way around the walls in impossible waves and spiral shapes.

"You've never really struck me as much of a reader," Jack said, cocking an eyebrow and tilting his head to the side as he looked at North.

"Ah, but these are not just any books. Every book here is a book of adventure, stories that might otherwise be lost to time!"

"You've read them all?"

"Sometimes toys are already designed, new production lines starting. Busy busy busy but nothing for me to do other than give orders and sign papers and tell yetis what to do. Is slow day here at workshop, but too busy for me to get out for adventure of my own. Is next best thing, reading about someone else's."

North walked over to a very stern-looking elf librarian, whispered something in his ear and the elf ran off to look for whatever North had asked him to look for.

"Why did you bring me here?" Jack started to ask, his suspicions aroused.

"You want to know his story, Jack," said North. "So I will give you his story, and you can see the man he will become. The man he became."

The elf came back and held out the book to North but Jack snatched it out of its hands before North could even reach for it, looking at the cover. It was in some Nordic language " maybe Icelandic?

" 'Hiksti and the Dragon'?"

"Look closer at name. Is in Old Norse. Takes moment longer for text to translate."

The word changed in front of his eyes. "Hiccup. Hiccup and the Dragon," Jack said, a wide grin forming on his face.

"There are comfy chairs over there."

Jack flew over to one of the comfy chairs, plopped down and got started. While he could read and speak fluently in any language like the other Guardians, that magic hadn't ever seemed to kick in for his native tongue and he'd never seemed to have gotten over the need to read aloud and follow along with his finger â€" probably a byproduct of learning to read in the time that the hornbook was considered a major advancement in education.

"'On an island called Berk, a frozen place that was a twelve days North of Hopelessness and a few degrees south of the Frozen Wastes of Death, there lived a boy named Hiccupâ€|'"

Jack read along and he saw Hiccup's life spread out in pictures in his mind. He read about the things he already knew, like the village not accepting him. He read about the shame in his father's eyes that he'd already seen. He read about the life Hiccup had when they left him behind, not much better than it had been.

Then he read about how it all changed.

"'The dragon thus struck down by Hiccup's weapon lay there on the forest floor and the boy raised his knife to strike it dead, but...something stayed his hand...'"

* * *

><p>He remembered. Hiccup remembered eyes that he'd looked into, the blue eyes of a spirit that had been so much like his own. He remembered the fear he saw in them as Jack stood there on the ice. The other boy had been a spirit, something like Hiccup, but also utterly alien.<p>

He saw that same fear now in the dragon's eyes as it lay before him, waiting to die.

Just like he had once before, he looked at another living being and he saw himself.

And just like that, his will to kill the dragon was gone. It had to be in pain as it laid there, the ropes digging into its skin. He could see the places where the scales had been scraped away, leaving behind raw welts.

"I did this," Hiccup said regretfully.

Jack had once said compassion was at his center, right? What kind of compassion was this, hurting a living being this way, even if it was an enemy?

Hiccup tried to turn away, tried to leave, but found that he couldn't. He just couldn't leave the dragon here like this, where it would likely starve and die if it wasn't freed.

So he turned, took his knife and started cutting the ropes that bound

it, knowing that it might try to attack him, but also knowing that it was the right thing to do.

* * *

><p>It was like dancing. He was dancing a dance that didn't make sense and yet had more meaning than just about anything else he'd done in his entire life. Step by step, he made his way through the lines scratched into the dirt, until finally he felt a presence at his back and felt the warm breath of the dragon blowing against his hair<p>

Hiccup turned around to face it, slowly holding out his hand. The dragon growled and he recoiled, afraid that his arm was going to get bitten off.

This was crazy. This was absolutely crazy, but he still felt as if he was standing on some sort of crumbling precipice, and the only way he'd reach solid ground again was if he jumped. Either he'd reach somewhere new or he'd fall into the abyss, but he couldn't just stay where he was.

It was the eyes that made him do it. Its eyes were so intelligent, so warm and curious. There had been times earlier where it had even looked annoyed, like a human would look if someone was prodding at them.

Right now, those eyes were looking at him with something that almost looked like understanding, even if the creature was still afraid.

The Viking felt like he was nearly vibrating out of his skin with fear, but he had to make the jump and see where he landed.

What was it that Jack had said?

"Hiccup, I promise you, someday you're going to have someone justâ€¦fall into your life, and when they do you just have to reach out."

Hiccup closed his eyes and slowly held out a hand towards the dragon, keeping it completely still. It felt like an eternity was passing, as if time had stopped and left everything frozen in place but him.

Then he felt a scaly nose butt his hand and he was filled with a feeling he'd felt only once before, another time that he realized that he'd made a friend: elation.

* * *

><p>Jack flipped through the pages, looking ahead a little, but trying not to read too much in depth to avoid spoiling himself<p>

"This thing is loooong," he said, looking over at North, who was sitting in another comfy chair, apparently reading some kind of pirate novel, judging by the cover. "Does it cover his whole life?"

"Most of it. Where are you at now?" North asked.

"The bit where he's got to kill the other dragon as a coming-of-age thing."

"Ah, now you're getting to good parts!"

Jack went back to reading. "'Hiccup entered the kill ring, and with a clang the door to the pen was opened and the Monstrous Nightmare burst into the ring, setting itself on fire as it darted around the cage. Hiccup was filled with fear, but he knew what he had to do.'"

* * *

><p>The Monstrous Nightmare finally stopped running around the ring in a panic, the flames going out, and he noticed Hiccup, craning his neck to look down at him. Stepping down to the floor of the ring, the dragon started to advance on the boy, clearly ready to go in for the kill.<p>

Hiccup started walking backwards, matching the dragon's pace, dropping his shield and knife, feeling as if each gesture was the same as discarding parts of his old self, as if all the parts of him that had once held doubt and felt weak were sloughing off.

"What do you see?"

"Flexibility. I see compassion and someone that sees the world a different way from most people. I see someone that tries to see it in new ways."

They had gone three hundred years fighting dragons and it needed to change. Hiccup hoped Jack was right about him, because then it meant he might be the kind of person who could change it.

"Hey, it's okay, it's okay," Hiccup said, in a voice he had used long ago when calming a friend standing on thin ice. His hands were held out in a placating gesture; trying to soothe the dragon by showing he was unarmed. He reached up for his helmet and took it off, throwing it to the ground. The clang it made when it hit the ground was something definitive, like a door closing so another could open.

"I'm not one of them," Hiccup said, finally defining himself rather than letting the village decide who and what he was.

It was harsh, but the truth. He had never really been one of them, even though he cared about them, even though he was trying to do this to save them from a pointless war as much as he was trying to save the dragons from the same. Hiccup knew he was something strange and different, that he saw the world in a different way, because a friend had told him that once, told him that he explored things and explored people.

And maybe not being one of them was a good thing. Maybe seeing the world a different way meant he could see a way it could be better.

Maybe, just maybe, that same friend that had told him being different

was a good thing was right about him being able to change the world for the better.

He hoped so. At the very least, he had to try.

"Stop the fight!" his father called out.

"No! I need you all to see this," Hiccup said decisively. "They're not what we think they are! We don't have to kill them."

The moment was perfect. The dragon was visibly calming down and all eyes were on him.

"I said STOP THE FIGHT!"

His father's hammer thundered against the metal cage of the kill ring and just like that, the moment was ruined.

* * *

><p>"Oh, come on!" Jack yelled at the book. He was upside down now, legs up against the back of the comfy chair. "Listen to your kid! He knows what he's talking about! Stoick, you're an idiot.<p>

Jack looked over at North and pointed to the book. "His dad's an idiot. He's an idiot. Oh hey, cookies. Thanks."

The elves came by then with a plate of cookies and Jack reached out and snagged one, almost putting it in his mouth before he took a good look at it. Then he looked over at the plate.

"Did you chew on some of these and then spit them out or something?"

The two elves looked at each other with stricken expressions then looked back at Jack and shook their heads, grinning wide, very-obviously-guilty grins.

Jack put the cookie back on the plate.

"Sometimes you guys are so gross."

Back to reading, though. There was a lot more book to get through and Jack was mesmerized.

* * *

><p>"For once in your life, would you please just listen to me?!" Hiccup cried out, pulling on his father's arm, trying to get him to stop<p>

To Hiccup's great shock, his father, who had never been physical with him before in his life, elbowed him hard enough to knock him backwards off his feet.

Stoick turned to face him.

"You've thrown your lot in with them. You're not a Viking. You're not my son."

It might as well have been a physical blow. It hurt worse than any physical blow ever could.

His father stalked out of the Great Hall, slamming the door so hard that instead of shutting, it bounced back open again, leaving Hiccup sitting cast in shadow with only a sliver of light from the outside shining over his face.

He didn't weep. He didn't curse his fate. He didn't decide to try to change it. He only sat with his expression blank and his heart hollowed out, feeling more alone than he ever had in his life.

* * *

><p>"Boo!" Jack cried out, enraged, sitting up so abruptly he nearly fell out of his chair. "Boo, Hiccup's dad, you suck! You suck! You are the head chief of sucking!"<p>

How could he? How dare he?

Fortunately, it didn't end there, with Hiccup demoralized and alone, his world fallen apart. It didn't end there because Hiccup was Hiccup and North was right about the children they told stories about, the ones who were brave and strong and kind.

* * *

><p>"Hiccup! I'm sorry. For everything."<p>

"Yeah, me too."

"You don't have to go up there."

Hiccup grinned, remembering something he'd said to a friend once, something he was sure he'd heard his father saying more than once.

"We're Vikings," he said. "It's an occupational hazard."

"I'm proud to call you my son."

Hiccup's eyes widened slightly. "Thanks, dad."

Courage was not the absence of fear. It was overcoming it. It was looking down at the ice cracking under you, looking at death come again, and not freezing up. It was trusting in your friends to help you do the impossible and risking your life leaching away to help someone that needed you.

Nothing else mattered anymore. It didn't matter how the village saw him, it didn't matter who or what he was. All that mattered was that he could be the kind of person Jack had seen him as. All that mattered was that his center was what he had said it was "and" and that he was what Hiccup wanted it to be.

He had to be brave, he had to use his brain and all the things he'd observed about the world to pull this off. To do it all, he had to care enough about the people he was trying to save to risk it all.

"And here you said you weren't the type to save somebodyâ€¦|"

But I am, thought Hiccup. _And I will._

And even though it came at a price, he did.

* * *

><p>Jack sat up, looking at the book, at the end of the first story, eyes wide and expression full of empathetic hurt, and looked over to North.<p>

"He...he lost his leg?"

North nodded with a sympathetic look on his face.

"But look at how thick the book is, Jack. So many adventures, so many accomplishments, so many joys. He lived a full life, a full and wonderful life, full of love and triumph and selflessness. All the rest of his adventures are there for you to read, and you can have book if you want."

Jack clutched the book to his chest. "Thanks, North. I'm gonna, um. I think I should read the rest alone."

If he got soppy at any points, he didn't really want anyone else to see.

"One thing you need to pay attention, too, though," said North. "Read the afterword. There are what you call 'spoilers' but the story is story, some may not be completely true. That part is fact."

Jack flipped to the end, to read the afterword.

"'Not much is known for sure about the real man behind the myth, but surviving historical records indicate that Hiccup the Dragon Conqueror was possibly one of the unsung heroes of the Viking age. Trade agreements with mainland Vikings and other European cultures indicate that as chief, he established fair trade practices with much of Europe and curtailed raiding on other countries by the island tribes that were allied with his people. Some historical records that have been brought to light in recent years show that his influence may have even led to a decline in the use of slaves among mainland Vikings as the dominance over trade routes by the island Vikings, and trade embargoes levied towards those communities that used thralls, led to not-so-subtle economic pressure to curtail the use of thralls in many Viking communities' â€" this is great. I love this."

Jack kept reading, "Hiccup is now thought to have been responsible for other major advances in the Nordic societies. For instance, there is some proof that his wife Astrid' â€" Hiccup, you dog, you â€" 'actually ruled by his side, with equal power and responsibilities. This and other indications of Viking women in important social and government roles during his rule suggest that women during Hiccup's reign as chief experienced rights that were unprecedented for the time, and practically unknown in other European societies.'"

Of course, knowing the women of Hiccup's tribe, anyone that tried to take away their rights would have gotten an axe to the face, so it wasn't something that could be entirely credited to him.

"It is also believed that advances in science and medicine prompted by Hiccup's instigation are partly responsible for sparing the Nordic island peoples from the Black Death, particularly regulations regarding the quarantine of sea-faring vessels. These regulations were thought to have been prompted by an incident in which a trade vessel brought a poison substance to the island of Berk that made many of the residents ill.' Geez, is there anything he didn't do?"

He went on, "'Recent archaeological findings are showing that the island chief known as Hiccup had a much greater role in ancient Norse society than once thought, making it clearer and clearer that he may have been one of the defining historical figures responsible for shaping the ancient Nordic peoples into what became the modern Nords of today.'"

He smiled at the next part. "'As for the stories about Hiccup taming dragons, it is, of course, impossible for them to be true.' No, it isn't. 'However, it is thought that a dangerous nearby tribe, with a name that translates to a word similar to 'dragon' is what is referred to in the surviving records and those later stories took on a literal and more fantastical interpretation. In this case, it is entirely possible that Hiccup struck up peaceful accord with them, and one surviving record indicates that the enemy-turned-friend known as No-Tooth was Hiccup's lifelong companion, even until his...his death of old age.'"

Jack swallowed thickly.

"As I said, time is relative, Jack," North said, putting a comforting hand on Jack's shoulder. "It means he lives now, in his moments in the past, every moment of his life, just as you live every moment of yours. Side by side."

Jack nodded slowly.

"Read footnotes, though. This is why I took interest in this book and remembered when we were there," said North. "I kept planning to tell you, since I thought you might find it of note, but never had a chance to."

Jack skimmed over the footnotes, until he saw what North was talking about. There was one particular footnote that referred back to the third story, chapter three, that had something that caught his eye.

"In all surviving stories Hiccup is known to thank a â€" a Jokul Frosti," said Jack, smiling a wide grin as the Norse name translated to his own name before his eyes, "'for favorable winter weather conditions for his people and for unfavorable winter weather conditions for enemies. The Hiksti stories are, in fact, one of the first recorded instances of the expression â€"

Jack's eyes went wide and he suddenly looked up at North.

* * *

><p>"Mmph." <p>

"Nope."

"Mmmph!"

"Nope nope."

"Astrid. Astrid, c'mon, let me up."

"You were gone. For _months_. Nope."

Hiccup found it difficult to really protest the fact that his wife was clinging to him like a limpet. Very very difficult. All he wanted to do was curl up against her and lay there in a tangle of limbs for, oh, the rest of his life? But there was chiefin' to be done, and the house was likely going to erupt into pure chaos shortly, and he needed a bath, and â€

Annnd her hand was sliding down his side.

"No no, nononono, I know where this is going and much as I'd love for it to go there, it can't go there when we're due at a convocation with every chief in the surrounding islands in an hour."

Hiccup managed to finally successfully squirm away, and he crawled over to the edge of the bed, taking a deep breath and nearly failing a check of his willpower, before reaching out for his false leg.

He felt fingers trailing against his back.

"I'm not turning around. I'm not even _looking_."

"Why not?" asked Astrid in a playful voice.

"Because if I turn around, you're going to be lying there sprawled out like some magnificent nude portrait and then I'm going to have to explain to twelve chiefs why we're late."

Astrid finally let out a grumbling noise of frustration. "I'm not sprawled out. I'm covered by a blanket."

"You're lying and I know how you work."

"Really, I'm not. There's a blanket over me. Come on, Hiccup, I want to see your face when you talk to me. I missed that face."

Because of the sincerity in her voice, Hiccup chanced a glance back, only to find out he was right, she was lying. He covered his eyes.

"Woman, cover your glory!" he said in the same scandalized tones someone else might say 'cover your shame!'

That prompted peals of laughter from Astrid, but he still didn't fall for it, opting to get up and go over to the bath to get it started.

"Fine, fine," she grumbled when the laughing stopped. "But you're mine tonight."

"After I spend some time with Toothless, because if I don't, he's

going to pick a fight with you and I wouldn't know which side to root for â€" or bet on."

"Then you're mine tonight after you spend time with Toothless."

The pipes creaked as the water was pumped through, but it was freezing cold when it come out. Hiccup went over to the door, cracking it open just a crack, keeping his lower body away from it. He pounded on it three times to get the attention of the others in the house.

"Aggi, I know you're awake!" Aggi was always awake this early. "Can you get Cinder to heat up the water cask?"

Cinder, was of course, his youngest daughter's Terrible Terror, who never minded helping out with household chores.

There was a high-pitched scream of delight and then the sound of multiple sets of feet pounding through the hallways of the house, and Hiccup quickly shut and locked the door. It wasn't a moment too soon because the second after he did it, the latch jangled and various fists pounded against the door. The zombie movie wasn't going to be created for quite a few centuries yet but if Hiccup were to live to see it, he'd have known what to compare the horde to.

"Daddy daddy daddy daddy!" squealed his youngest, his daughter Snotra, Snotty for short. Named after Snotlout, initially reluctantly, and then enthusiastically after he saved her live when she was a newborn.

"Dad, like, oh my gods, you would not believe all the stuff that happened with my friend Bekki while you were away -" That was Disa, who Hiccup realized, with a pang, had had her fourteenth birthday while he was gone.

"Hey, dad, I totally learned this new flying trick â€" That was Aggi.

And of course, his oldest, Grai was in full enthusiasm mode. "Dadddaaaay! I can bench my own weight in rocks now, it's totally cool â€"

So where was Ubbi?

"Kids, can one of you go get Cinder to heat up the water?"

He was totally ignored.

"- daddy daddy, I learned how to use the potty, daddy -"

"- she is totally not my friend anymore, but, like, she won't give me my riding harness back, so I'm not giving her the bracers back that she lent me â€"

"- sort of all swoosh, upside down, but then you shoot straight down and up again into a barrel roll â€"

"- I've been trying to eat more meat because Snotlout says meat builds muscle, but I don't want to bulk up too much because the chicks are digging more of a leaner look nowadays, kind of a V-shape

_"

"Kids, daddy will be out in a minute, but I could really use - and you're not listening, at all, are you."

They were all still jabbering over him through the door in their excitement.

"Can you help me wrangle the horde here?" Hiccup asked Astrid, where she lay on the bed.

She was always better at snapping them to attention.

"Oh no no no, they're your kids."

"Yet you're the one that wanted your own army."

"When they listen, they're mine," joked Astrid, sitting up in bed, finally covering herself with the blankets. "When they're an excitable, uncontrollable horde of grabby hands and chattering tongues, they're yours."

Right then, there was a loud explosion from the attic, which made them all go silent.

Then a small voice called out, "I'm okay!"

"Ubbi's up," said Astrid.

Hiccup took advantage of the moment of perplexed silence. "Kids, the first one to get Cinder to heat up the water cask so your dad can get a bath gets the first hug!"

At that, there was a loud scramble in the hallway as they all ran off to try to be the first.

"Resorting to bribery, tsk tsk," said Astrid.

Hiccup tilted his head at her with a grin. "Don't knock it; it works, doesn't it?"

With that, he went over to the bath, gave it a minute, and then finally when he turned the tap again and the downstairs pump started chugging away, hot water came out. Mixing the water from both taps until it was pleasantly warm; he took his false leg off again and used the bars attached to the tub to guide himself in. Astrid walked over, blanket gathered around her, and sat down next to the tub, reaching her hand in to help wash him. The tub, unfortunately, didn't have enough room for both of them to fit - especially since Astrid had bulked up over the years to Amazonian proportions. She now had a whole head on Hiccup in height, the kind of muscles that made it possible for her to throw men around like rag dolls, and a healthy layer of fat over top it all that rounded out her figure. There was no way that she could look anything but matronly after having several kids, but Hiccup adored it. Whenever she held him in her arms, it was like he was being absorbed into her and he couldn't imagine feeling closer to another human being.

Because they didn't fit in the tub together, sometimes when one of them was taking a bath, the other would sit next to the tub and help

the other get all sudsy â€" while getting a little handsy in the process.

"So, you never got to tell me how it went with William. I'm assuming with you not being dead and me not currently on a quest for bloody revenge that it went well."

"You never let me get the chance to talk last night," Hiccup pointed out wryly, as Astrid rubbed her hand against Hiccup's fuzzy beard. (He'd never really managed to grow a proper one.) "But it went as well as it could have. First, they introduced me as 'The Barbarian King' of the Northern Islands..."

Hiccup rolled his eyes at that and Astrid laughed.

"Then they harped on the news they'd heard of the fact that we share the chieftom, about being ruled by my woman - the women there are practically sold and traded like things, y'see, so it pretty much blew their little brains that we do things differently here. So I pointed out how barbaric we were, yes indeedy, treating our women like people and how they were hardly barbaric at all in slaughtering anyone that disagreed with them and selling and trading their women like cattle, and how they were lucky they were insulting you when I had come for the proceedings instead of you, because then they'd see real barbarism. That got a bug up ol' Willy's nose."

Astrid laughed as she pushed a soapy hand through Hiccup's hair. "If I'd gone, he'd be dead, but that's why you handle all the diplomacy in the Mainlands and I handle so much of it up here. Go on, though, this is getting good."

"So then he tried to play up the fact that he's descended from Viking raiders to show how tough he is. Like being descended from raiders even means anything." Hiccup held up his hands in an 'I'm sooo scared' gesture. "Ooh, so tough, people that kill innocent villagers that barely fight back â€" when we spent how many centuries fighting dragons or other hostile Vikings instead of hapless villagers?"

"How'd he take your offer?"

"He didn't like it, implied he'd take what he wanted by force and that he had his gaze set north. Then I gave the signal and had the dragons do their flyby and made it abundantly clear he wasn't welcome in the north and that King Olaf was in agreement with me, and was willing to violate his ceasefire if England got too hostile. But I told him if he wanted to still try, he could go ahead, and to be prepared to have his ships sent home heaped with the ash that used to be his soldiers. I told him that any of his soldiers the dragons missed, our people would finish off, seeing as every one of them is a fierce and ruthless warrior â€" the women included."

Now Astrid laughed uproariously, and she grabbed Hiccup's head and pulled him in for a kiss.

"I love it when you get homicidally threatening."

"Well, it is what it is. I hate fighting as much as the next â€" uh, I can't say 'next Viking' since they all love fighting - but if he wants to start something, we'll finish it. We don't have to worry

about it, though. By then, he was nearly wetting himself so he signed the treaty and the trade agreement and unless he's feeling crazy, England will prob'ly be staying out of our hair. Worst comes to worst, Olaf's not keen on him coming north and the Danes won't be either. In fact, there's a chance they're considering an attempted invasion of England, but we'll see how that pans out. We don't want to get mired down by a mess like that, we need to just stick to a defensive stance or they're going to try to drag us into every mess they make."

Hiccup rinsed his hair and then Astrid helped him out of the tub to the little bench next to it, handing him one of the tattered pieces of old sheets they used as towels, then picked up the blanket and went over to sit on the bed again, wrapping herself up. It was a bit too cold to lounge around like a glorious artistic nude, truth be told, and he wasn't letting himself be lured in this morning.

"I wish I'd been there."

"If you'd been there, the King of England would be dead â€" and rightfully so, because he's a jerk," Hiccup said, getting dressed.

"Exactly. I wish I'd been there."

Hiccup laughed, and finally pulled his leg beg on, doing up the straps with a well-practiced deftness. Then he went over, leaned over the bed and kissed her soundly.

"We can't go killing all our enemies."

"I know, I know, just the really horrible ones. (He sounds horrible, though.)"

"He is, but he's out of our hair for now. How'd it go here?"

"Little skirmish with the Berserkers near Hopeless, but we sent them running with their tails between their legs. No casualties. The meeting with the Chief of the Shivering Shores went well; he liked the gift I thought up for him. Got the spring harvest in and the fishing fleets out. The usual. Next time, I get to go on the diplomatic mission, if you're just going to resort to laying down creative threats anyway."

"Okay, okay, next time you get to go. You are better at threatening people than I am."

With one last kiss, Hiccup finally stood up straight and walked over and got his fur cloak â€" the one that had belonged to his father when he was alive â€" off the hook near the door, putting it on with his usual wistfulness. Astrid had one like it to mark her as co-chief, the one she'd made out bearskin she'd gotten from the bear she'd killed with a rock and her bare hands during that crazy adventure they'd had in Norway.

"While you get ready, I'll get the kids fed and out for the day; they're champing at the bit to see me, anyway."

"Good luck and go with the grace of the gods," Astrid said with mock solemnity. "I'll be praying for you to survive, since you're probably

going to get trampled and smothered to death with hugs."

Hiccup laughed as he opened the door. "That's a little dramatic, don't you thin â€"

It was right as he closed it that he was literally tackled to the floor by multiple crushing hugs. His youngest was clinging to his chest and squealing a deafening squeal of delight in his ear. Even Ubbi had come down out of his room, his face still blackened with soot from the explosion he'd caused from whatever experiment he'd been working on, his hair standing on end.

The Haddock household was its usual circus as he tried to listen to all of them simultaneously, as he tried to talk to all of them simultaneously, and as he told them about his recent adventure (and given the pirates, water dragons, and sea monster, it had indeed been adventure). Toothless basked in his attention as well, at his usual place next to the table. A minor injury to the shoulder meant that Hiccup had taken Stormfly on the trip to see the king so the Night Fury could recover and according to what Astrid had said the night before, it had taken the entire time Hiccup had been away for Toothless to get less resentful of the fact.

Breakfast was eaten, hugs were given, and then it was time to get them out the door to play for the day.

As rowdy a group as they were, Hiccup wouldn't have given it up for the world.

Though sometimes, they did drive him slightly nuts.

"Hey, hey, who was playing with the stuff on our trophy shelf?" There was a shelf in their main living area that held trophies he and Astrid had picked up during their travels and adventures. Nothing dangerous â€" swords and other weapons of their enemies were kept in a trunk under their beds since they weren't exactly what you'd call childsafe.

But little baubles and gifts of thanks from people's they'd helped, the mask of an assassin they'd brought down, things like that were up on the shelf.

Something was missing, though, something very important.

Hiccup turned around, hands on his hips. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?" asked Snotty, looking the picture of innocence. The others weren't even paying attention â€" they were getting their boots on to go outside.

Hiccup wasn't buying the innocence.

"The little wooden figure."

"Which one?"

"The blue one."

"There was a blue one?"

"The blue one that's probably sitting with your other dolls right now having a picnic," Hiccup clarified and her eyes went wide as she realized she was caught. "Go bring it back."

The three-year-old sighed an exaggerated sigh as she trundled off. "It's not fair, daddy, it's a toy, you're supposed to play with toys."

"It's _daddy's_ toy and daddy wants to keep it safe on the shelf."

She brought it back and handed it to her father.

"Sorry, peapod, but this is something important to daddy," he said gently, kissing her on the forehead, patting her head, and turning to put it back on the shelf. The paint had long since worn off in some places, where Hiccup's fingers had rubbed against it for good luck during times of nervousness, but it still smiled down from its place on the shelf with sparkling blue eyes filled with joy.

Hiccup looked on it fondly. "It's all I have left of an old friend."

With that, he gathered them all up and got them headed out the door. Toothless bounded along with them out into the snow. While the two eldest would run around with the other teens, Toothless was the one that always minded the younger ones.

On the island of Berk, kids didn't just have a mommy and daddy. They usually had Mommy and Daddy and Dragon.

Hiccup gave his dragon a pat on the nose. "Thanks for keeping an eye on them; it's going to be a crazy day. Have them back late afternoon for lunch and lessons? I'll have a big basket of fish waiting for you. And tonight, we'll go night-flying. The moon should be full so we'll have plenty of light with it reflecting off the snow."

The dragon nosed against his neck and chuffed out a sound that meant 'We'd _better_ go flying,' before trundling off with the Ubbi and Aggi. (Hiccup and Astrid still brought Snotty around with them if both of them had to go somewhere, because she was still so little.)

"Wait! Ubbi, get back here."

Ubbi trundled back through the snow towards his father, as he ducked back inside and came out again, something blue and woolly clutched in his hand.

"You forgot your hat."

"I don't need a hat, dad, it's not that cold," Ubbi insisted.

"It's cold enough to give your liver frostbite. _Hat_."

"Fiiine."

Hiccup put the hat on his son's head and realizing it was crooked, adjusted it compulsively.

"You've gotta keep a hat on when it's this cold. After all," he beeped his son's nose, making him smile, and went on, "You don't want Jack Frost nipping at your nose."

* * *

><p>"I always wondered where it came from," Jack said, the words on the page blurring as he looked at them again. "No one could see me, no one could hear me, I didn't know how they knew my name if nothing was getting through. It says here it spread to the US from Nordic immigrants. It makes sense, that's when I started to hear it, when a lot of immigrants came into the country."<p>

He looked up at North. "He's the one that started it. There were times I almost gave up hope, but people knew my name. They somehow knew my name and I knew if they at least knew that, maybe someday..." Maybe someday, they'd believe. And they _had_. "If Jamie hadn't heard that phraseâ€|"

North just smiled at him. "Now it all makes sense, after our adventure. A gift to you like the one you gave to him, Jack. Treasure it."

"I'm gonnaâ€| I'm gonna go, um." He held up the book. He wanted to read the rest and he wanted to read it alone. "And Northâ€|thanks."

"Is no problem, my friend."

With that, Jack flew away, and out through one of the entrances, which was opened for him by the yetis as he passed.

Looking out at the night sky with tears in his eyes, he saw familiar constellations looking down at him. Hurg the Hunter, Bjorn the Batterer, and the Neely the Voluptuous â€" whose story Jack never got to hear â€" gazed down on him just as they'd looked down on Hiccup long ago.

Only, North _was_ right, time was relative. It was just a hop, skip, and a magical jump away, apparently. That meant Hiccup lived just as Jack lived. It meant he'd always live the same times that Jack lived, in his time in the past.

Smiling, Jack adjusted the hat Hiccup had given him, and flew off into the night.

In the coming years, and decades, and then centuries, Jack's other clothes always changed with the times as they always had, but that odd, mismatched hat never went away. Jack was certainly one of the most fun myths running around, but no one would ever really make the argument that he was one of the best-dressed.

* * *

><p>They landed on a cliff â€" the same cliff, in fact, that Hiccup had once looked out from and said a prayer to Odin - and got ready for a proper dive and an attempt at a trick they hadn't managed to perfect before Hiccup'd gone away on his little mission to England.<p>

"Oh, bud, you have no idea how much I missed you," Hiccup said, leaning down and hugging the dragon's head tightly. Toothless chuffed out a delighted noise back that Hiccup read as 'Right back at'cha, tinybro.'

"You sure that shoulder is feeling better?"

The noise Toothless made in response to that was so comical Hiccup laughed.

"Well, neither of us is getting any younger, bud. We both need to take it easy when we get hurt. I'll take that as a yes, though. Anyway, ready?"

Toothless let out a rumble in agreement and then wiggled on his haunches, ready to jump into a dive.

"Go!"

With that, the dragon jumped into the air and into a dive towards the snow-covered ground. The snow and ice were nearly phosphorescent in the light of the moon, meaning that the world had a strange glow to it, like it was only twilight, almost. The snowy tree-tops were shaken by the wind from Toothless's wings as they came up out of the dive and Hiccup let out a whoop of joy as they soared back up into the cold night air.

It felt good to do this again after his long journey south.

He and his best friend always had fun together, and now that he and Astrid were always busy chieftaining, it was hard to sneak that in sometimes.

Down below, the village â€" no, now it was more like a city, a colony â€" sprawled out in over the island, torches flickering in the night.

This was Berk, crown jewel of the Northern Tribes. Though to call it a jewel was perhaps too generous; it was more like coal - valuable, useful, and like its residents, capable of leaving a grimy residue on everything it touched. It was a prosperous land with a hard-working, generous people that lived in relative peace with the rest of the world, despite a slight propensity to headbutt others into submission.

Berk had been shaped into what it was because of the vision and dreams of a boy who had looked for warmth and kindness when he needed it most and found it in the form of five spirits that had fallen from the sky one cold Snoggletog night a very long time ago. In one of those spirits, he'd even found a friend when he'd never had one before.

As Hiccup flew with his best friend over a snowy expanse that reflected the moonlight, he thought of his first friend, never knowing that he'd given him hope and saved him from loneliness, and always grateful that, for him, Jack had done the same.

End

file.